

“After all, he will be a god one day”:
Religious Interpretations of Mao in Modern China

By: Christopher Jensen

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of Religion and Culture

University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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Abstract

In the years since Mao Zedong's death, the people of China have been impelled to reevaluate the legacy and character of their still iconic leader. One of the more notable trends in this process of posthumous reevaluation is the tendency of some individuals and groups (most often, the rural peasantry) to interpret the deceased Chairman along "theological" lines, assuming that his still-efficacious spirit will provide protection and good fortune to those who honour him.

In exploring the genesis (and continued salience) of these beliefs and practices, the present research delves into popular Chinese religiosity, exploring the porosity of the traditional cosmology, the centrality of perceived spiritual efficacy (*ling*) in determining the popularity of religious cults, and the theological and cosmological resonances extant within traditional understandings of political leadership. The body of metaphors, narratives, and tropes drawn from this historical overview are then applied to popular characterizations of Mao, with the resulting correspondences helping to explicate the salience of these modern religious interpretations. To further investigate the source of Mao's persistent symbolic capital, the present research also explores the role of Cultural Revolution-era ritual in valorizing and reifying the power and efficacy then popularly ascribed to the Great Helmsman's person and teachings. This study's conclusion, in brief, is that participants in the posthumous cult of Mao are utilizing these cultural materials in both traditional and creative ways, and that such interpretations speak to the exigencies of life in the turbulent, ideologically ambiguous culture of modern China.

In performing this evaluation, the present research makes use of the standard phenomenological/historiographic approach of religious studies scholarship, though it is also informed by narrative methods, cognitive science, and current perspectives on the role and function of ritual. In particular, the analysis of Mao-era rituals (as a source of Mao's continued symbolic potency) is performed using the cognivistic typology of ritual proposed by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, with additional materials drawn from the research of Catherine Bell, Roy Rappaport, Pascal Boyer and Adam Chau.

Acknowledgment

This project is dedicated to Drs. Lorne Holyoak and Thomas Selover. Not only did they first inspire me to look into these materials, but they have also provided me with valuable feedback and encouragement – even when external circumstances made such a collaborative process difficult. My sentiments are echoed in the first verse of the *Analects*: “To learn and then have occasion to put into practice what you have learned – is this not satisfying?”

I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial support provided by the University of Saskatchewan and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Author's Note

Following the typographical conventions of modern China, I have elected to use the *pinyin* romanization scheme in the present document, with two notable exceptions: 1) I did not alter instances of Wade-Giles romanization inside of quotations; 2) I did not modify the names of Chinese authors who choose (or chose) to render their names in Wade-Giles. I hope that this will not cause any confusion.

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Chapter 1: Methods, Introductory Matters, and Mise-en-Scène

Background

In the summer of 2005, I climbed into a taxi in Qufu (a city in Shandong province) and noticed a small amulet hanging from the driver's rear-view mirror. At first, it did not seem terribly noteworthy, in that it was virtually identical to any number of similar icons that I had already seen since arriving in China – a loop of red thread with a “lucky knot” underneath of it and an iconic image of a religious figure. However, instead of depicting Guanyin or the God of Wealth, this particular charm was emblazoned with an image of a glowing red sun, which was partially obscured by Chairman Mao Zedong's smiling face. Later, in a visit to the Zhou Enlai Museum in Tianjin (a site brimming with historical PRC tchotchkes), I saw (and was compelled to purchase) a set of similar charms (depicting Mao, Zhou and the diminutive Deng Xiaoping) from the official gift shop.

My experiences with these perplexing artifacts were neither isolated nor anomalous. In fact, they are emblematic instances of the religious interpretations of Mao that have emerged among some segments of the Chinese population since the early 1990s – a process that was first described in academic literature in Alvin P. Cohen's 1993 article, “A New Deity in the People's Republic of China: Mao Zedong.” In his paper, Cohen details his first encounter with these amulets, wherein a taxi driver informed him that Mao's image “would protect the car from accidents and protect him from harm.” Extrapolating on this, the driver also offered the theological speculation that “Mao Zedong has become like a deity (*shen*).”¹ In a like manner, Emily Chao, in an anthropological account from 1999, offers a similar account of these phenomena in Lijiang (the town where she did her fieldwork), noting the role of the deceased leader's perceived posthumous efficacy² in encouraging such devotions, as well as the government's tacit acceptance of these practices:³

¹ Alvin P. Cohen, “A New Deity in the People's Republic of China: Mao Zedong,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, Fall 1993 (21), 129-130. 129.

² The role of spiritual efficacy (*ling* 靈) in the folk psychology of Chinese popular religion and in religious interpretations of Mao is explored at length in the second and third chapters of the present study.

³ Though the government's ambiguous position on these issues is outside the scope of the present study, it is discussed at some length in the conclusion (ff. 11) as a topic for future research.

Mao memorabilia (or “Maomorabilia”) in the form of taxi amulets, Mao buttons, and commemorative Mao fountain pens were being sold at both the open market (which caters to national and international tourists) and the government department store (whose customers are local people). The presence of such items and their local buyers illustrates the ling (magic power) that continues to be associated with Mao.⁴

Over and above these accounts of Mao’s image in apotropaic talismans, some sources also describe his incorporation into various other religious observances, including pilgrimages and temple worship.⁵ Indeed, one of the most notable elements of these religious interpretations is their seeming inexorability, as quintessentially summarized by an interview with a visitor to the Mao temple in Gushuicun, who felt compelled to visit the shrine because, “[a]fter all, he [Mao] will be a god one day.”⁶ As such (and in spite of the fact that this type of popular deification was only one of many perspectives on Mao adopted during this period),⁷ it remains the case that the popular worship of China’s deceased political dynamo is a matter deserving serious attention within the academic study of religion.

In interpreting these occurrences, it is tempting simply to note the great irony in the fact that Mao Zedong, who did all that he could to eradicate “feudal superstition in the P.R.C.,” “was now being worshipped as a deity (at least by some peasants)”⁸ – a perspective that is echoed by many others in academic and popular discourse.⁹ This approach, while understandable, belittles these peasants by making the paternalistic assumption that they would alter their wrong-headed

⁴ Emily Chao, “The Maoist Shaman and the Madman: Ritual Bricolage, Failed Ritual, and Failed Ritual Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14(4) (1999): 505-534. 531 ff. 16. This comment was paralleled by my own experiences in the Zhou Enlai Museum – a government-owned facility that also sold these devotional artifacts.

⁵ Cohen (1993), 129-130. See also: Nicholas D. Kristof, “China’s Newest God: The Godless Mao,” *The New York Times* (Jun 2, 1992), A1/A8, and, for an indigenous perspective, Xin Yuan’s “A Place in the Pantheon: Mao in Folk Religion” in Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader, edited and translated by Geremie R. Barmé, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 195-200.

⁶ Jane Macartney, “A cigarette is tucked into the statue’s hand. Thirty years after his death, Mao is revered as less than a god but more than a man,” *Times Online* (September 9, 2006),

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article633620.ece>. Given that this interview was undoubtedly translated from the Chinese, it should be noted that the English word “god” is typically used as an analogue of the Chinese *shen* 神, despite the fact that there are numerous differences between their denotations and connotations. Those particularities of popular Chinese theologies (and their attendant cosmologies) that are relevant to understanding religious interpretations of Mao are treated at length in chapter two of the present study.

⁷ Indeed, Barmé (1995) argues that Mao has been “commercialized” (through memoirs, audio cassettes, and cultural tourism), “lampooned” (through satirical literature and visual art) and “sanctified” (through the development of various Mao cults) (49), as will be discussed in chapter three.

⁸ Cohen (1993), 130.

⁹ For some examples, see Kristof (1992); Jonathan Watts, “Mao returns to haunt and comfort his people,” *The Guardian* (Saturday December 27, 2003); Jacob Heilbrunn, “Mao more than Ever,” *The New Republic* (April 21, 1997), 20-24.

perspectives “if they only knew what *we* know.”¹⁰ One particularly egregious example of this intellectually imperialistic stance can be found in Dick Wilson’s (uncritically titled) The People’s Emperor, Mao, where he laments that “the trouble was that the Chinese clung obstinately to their old ways of doing things, and much of Mao’s energy had to be expended on efforts to change irrational traditions before new rational substitutes could be implanted.”¹¹ As will be seen, this perspective proves to be mistaken in its dismissal of China’s religious and cultural traditions and in its characterization of these traditions as maladaptive.

The impetus for the present research emerges from an unwillingness to accept these explanations, especially given the failure of many studies¹² to acknowledge the role of traditional Chinese concepts and practices in informing present-day realities (such as the recent (and on-going) Mao craze described above). In contrast to this, my contention is that understanding the public’s (re)appropriation of Mao requires attention to the multivalent and interrelated perspectives on religion and politics developed throughout the panoply of Chinese history. The failure to attend to China’s cultural and historical context often leads to a depiction their subjects as backwards or even irrational. Moreover, such approaches are predicated upon an unjustifiably constrained picture of human cognition, ignoring a considerable body of modern research that characterizes human mental processes as being utilized and developed as much through

¹⁰ Intriguingly, this type of characterization bears considerable similarities to the paternalistic theories developed by Frazer and Durkheim, each of whom largely denied the functional utility of any form of cognition aside from Western-style, analytic thought. See Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), who summarizes this overall approach (48).

¹¹ Dick Wilson, The People’s Emperor, Mao: A Biography of Mao Tse-tung, (New York: Lee Publishers Group, 1979). 493.

¹² For example, Erika Evasdottir’s excellent Obedient Autonomy: Chinese Intellectuals and the Achievement of Orderly Life, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), which provides a detailed and intriguing description of the lives of modern Chinese intellectuals without acknowledging the implicitly Confucian ethos underlying their social interactions and their understandings of human relationships. Similarly, many biographies of Mao, including Stephen Uhalley Jr.’s Mao Tse-tung: A Critical Biography (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975) and Quan Yanchi’s Mao Zedong: Man, Not God (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press), greatly downplay the relevance of existing cultural images and tropes in Mao’s life, thought and impact. Some older articles, based on their inaccurate predictions concerning “the future” of China also fail to acknowledge the possibility of the public Mao cult. One example can be seen in Stuart R. Schram’s otherwise excellent “Party Leader or True Ruler? Foundations and Significance of Mao Zedong’s Political Power” in Foundations and Limits of State Power in China, edited by Stuart R. Schram, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies / Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1987), 203-256, where he makes the following faulty assertion: Mao has not “become ‘even more sacred,’ nor has there been even ‘some deification’ of Mao. ... As for his charisma, it cannot be said to have been routinized, or mis-appropriated, since it is scarcely in evidence. Indeed, it seems rather to have evaporated” (244). While this statement may have been true in 1987, when the article was released, it has been utterly contradicted by historical developments since its publication (such as the phenomena described above and at length in chapter three).

performance¹³ and analogy¹⁴ as through discrete, dialogical cogitation. Thus, this treatise will attempt to address the religious reinterpretation of Mao (and the constellation of beliefs and practices that surround it) by exploring the roles of metaphor and ritual in Chinese thought, as exemplified by their historical understanding of (and response to) gods and political leaders. From this perspective, the popular conception of Mao becomes far more coherent, as it then becomes not only internally consistent, but also historically situated and (performatively/praxically) rational.

More specifically, the present study advances two related hypotheses concerning these religious re-appropriations of Mao: first, that descriptions of Mao as a god¹⁵ emerge from a culturally conditioned understanding of the relationship between worldly and spiritual power; and, second, that one of the primary means by which such images became both personally meaningful and socially functional is through their inculcation via ritual means. In exploring these two related contentions, the present study subdivides the problem into three components, each of which are dealt with in their own chapters. In particular, chapter two delves into role of *ling* (spiritual efficacy) in the traditional Chinese understanding of ghosts, gods and ancestors, and notes the functional (and metaphorical) similarities between the role of emperors and gods in Chinese society – both of which help establish a historical precedent for the apotheosization of a political leader. Chapter three explores various popular characterizations of Chairman Mao (as presented in ethnographies, scholarly studies, newspaper reports and popular literature) and demonstrates their compatibility with the spiritual potency framework outlined in chapter two. Finally, chapter four addresses one of the means through which these characterizations of Mao would have derived their salience – namely, through his incorporation into the canon of Chinese ritual. In making this case, I begin by exploring some relevant classical Chinese and modern

¹³ For example, see Tambiah (72-73) for a discussion of the role of ritual/performative action in maintaining and developing relationships and social mores (72-73).

¹⁴ For a neuroscientific approach, see Steven Pinker's How the Mind Works, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), where he argues that one of the basic processes underlying human thought is the ability to relate abstract ideas through temporal and spatial metaphors – a process he claims is central to the bulk of higher mental functions (352-358). For a more theoretical perspective, see Douglas Hofstadter's work, particularly his essay "Analogies and Roles in Human and Machine Thinking" and his voluminous treatise Gödel, Escher and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid – A metaphorical fugue on minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll, where the relationship between self-reference, analogy making and consciousness are explored in great detail.

¹⁵ Likewise, I argue that images of Mao as an emperor also follow this pattern, given the historical relationship between imperial power and spiritual power (not to mention the cosmological and "theological" significance granted to the ruler in the traditional Chinese worldview). These issues are explored in detail in chapter two.

western theories on the function of ritual, and then proceed to outline some Mao-centered rituals within that theoretical context.

Before delving into this argument, however, it is first necessary to explore some broader concerns that have motivated the shape of the entire project, such as the rejection of the (often implicitly) Orientalist discourse referred to above, a conviction concerning continuity in Chinese history, and some reflections on the relationship between language, culture, and cognition.

Theoretical Perspectives

Ahistoricism: The May 4th Movement and its Modern Fate

Given that many Western studies adopt an ahistorical position in dealing with modern China, the first theoretical issue to be assessed is the propriety of this stance. Intriguingly, while such approaches do in fact bear marked similarities to many twentieth-century Chinese perspectives on their own culture and traditions, I would argue that they are becoming increasingly ill suited for current Sinological scholarship (especially in the context of popular belief and practice).¹⁶ To demonstrate this fact, it is first necessary to briefly outline the twentieth-century Chinese experiment with ahistoricism, in order to demonstrate its gradual loss of intellectual currency.

In brief, twentieth-century China's entry into the modern era was characterized by a considerable attempt to distance itself from its own historical legacy, largely motivated by its defeat during the Opium War and its humiliation throughout the following decades of imperialistic occupation, with many intellectuals viewing these affronts as caused by failings of (or lacunae in) traditional Chinese culture. This trend reached its apex in the May 4th movement, during which leading thinkers argued that the only way for China to truly take its place in the

¹⁶ This being said, it should be noted that ahistoricism is a multivalent term. On one hand, it can simply be seen as an indifference towards historical processes, often with the assumption that they are irrelevant. On the other, it can also be characterized as an active rejection of (or rebellion against) these historical realities. An analogy can help make this point: just as some atheists consider speculations on the existence of god/gods to be meaningless non-issues, others feel compelled (often due to their own personal experiences) to rail against all forms of religious belief. Without oversimplifying the issue, I would suggest that the bulk of "ahistorical" Western scholars can be grouped into the first category, while the majority of "ahistorical" Chinese scholars are better categorized as belonging to the second. This is nowhere more clear than amongst the intellectuals of the May Fourth Period (which will be discussed presently).

modern world was to adopt Western-style democracy, science and philosophy. Though some moderate scholars argued that the two traditions could potentially reinforce one another (most typically using the rhetoric of “Chinese substance” and “Western function” (*zhongti xiyong*)),¹⁷ the majority wholeheartedly propounded the iconoclastic thesis that modernization required China to divorce itself from its “backward” cultural institutions (including, but not limited to, Confucianism).¹⁸ This seeming desire to downplay (or even utterly deny) historical realities reached its apex in the Chinese Communist movement, which, at the height of its own totalistic influence, urged citizens to *Smash the Four Olds* (“old ideology, culture, customs and habits”).¹⁹ The nadir of this ahistorical iconoclasm can be seen in Levenson’s rather dismal assessment of the continued relevance of Chinese historical traditions:

The first commitment [to “truth”] brings many men to intellectual alienation from Chinese tradition, while the second [to “tradition”] leaves them with an emotional tie to it. ... I believe that an understanding of this principle make the chronological sequence in modern Chinese history logically comprehensible. As traditional ideas change in losing their unquestioned intellectual adaptability, and traditionalists fail thereby to maintain the harmony of special and general, “mine” and “true” iconoclasm thrives. But iconoclasts, of the mildest or deepest hue, face the danger of the same failure, and their ideas change – in a series of acceptance, rejection, and acceptance of something new – as they seek a formula which will keep the psychological peace. The quest for this formula has been the common ground of all the new currents of Chinese thought since the Opium War. How can the thinker scrap Chinese ideas which the western impact has made to seem

¹⁷ See Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* (Vol. I), (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 59-78, for a good overview of the development of the *ti / yong* dichotomy as a paradigm for Chinese modernization.

¹⁸ For a good overview of the May Fourth Movement (with particular reference to its impact upon the Chinese assessment of the Confucian tradition), see the first two chapters of Umberto Bresciani’s *Reinventing Confucianism: The New Confucian Movement*, (Taipei, Taiwan: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2001). For a concise and helpful online resource, see also Yih-Hsien Yu’s article on “Modern Chinese Philosophy (1901-1949)” in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/mod-chin.htm#SH4b>. Accessed July 11, 2008. As this article notes (quoting from Wing-tsit Chan’s *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*), “At the turn of the [20th] century, ideas of Schopenhauer, Kant, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Kropotkin were imported. After the intellectual renaissance of 1917, the movement advanced at a rapid pace. In the following decade, important works of Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, James, Bergson, and Marx, and others became available in Chinese. ... Almost every trend of thought had its exponent. ... For a time it seemed Chinese thought was to be completely Westernized” (Yu (2007)). Thomas Metzger makes a similar point in *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), when he notes that “the slogan of ‘total Westernization’ was popular for a time, and Marxism flourished amidst the ferment of this attack on the Confucian tradition” (191).

¹⁹ For an overview of these policies and a “ground-level” description of their devastating effects upon Qufu (the birthplace of Confucius), see Wang Liang, “The Confucius Temple Tragedy of the Cultural Revolution” in *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*. Edited by Thomas A. Wilson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002. 376-400.

inadequate, while he preserves his confidence of Chinese equivalence with the West?
How shall he see himself as modern man and modern Chinese together?²⁰

It should be noted that the above quotation is not included to imply that Levenson was ahistorical in his own approach (indeed, he was probably more conscious than most western scholars of the weight of China's history upon its modern occupants) but instead that he acknowledged the predominance of iconoclastic ahistoricism in the Chinese self-understanding – at least as it appeared at the time of his book's publication (in 1969).

Despite the fact that these Mao-era excesses have since been curbed, the equation between progress and Westernization has been a common touchstone of Chinese philosophy and political policy until the relatively recent past,²¹ though some signs, including the renewed promotion of Confucius as an ethical exemplar, suggest that this trend is in the process of being reversed²² – some dismissive Western assessments notwithstanding.²³ In support of this assertion, I not only argue that these historical traditions are central to fully understanding various modern Chinese phenomena, but that they are in fact “alive and well” (at least in their popular manifestations). This position is forcefully expounded in Xing Lu's Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where she makes the following argument:

While Mao worship resembled the mass mobilization and personality cults of other totalitarian societies such as Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia, it can also be traced to

²⁰ Levenson, xxxii-xxxiii. My apologies for the gender-insensitivity of this passage.

²¹ This being said, Metzger convincingly argues that many leading intellectuals – even those who iconoclastically attacked Chinese cultural traditions (in general) and Confucianism (in specific) – were, in fact, informed by a distinctively Confucian ethos concerning the need to seek moral ideals and harmonizing transformation within society: “It seems clear that much of this ethos has persisted in the twentieth century, notably the continuing trend away from Western individualism; the totalistic emphasis on eliminating selfishness and achieving social oneness; the ontological faith in the oneness of spirit and matter, which has given Marxist materialism an intellectual context and support missing in the West; and the tendency towards ‘ideological’ thought, common to the Communists, the Kuomintang, scientistic liberals like Yin Hai-huang, and tradition-oriented thinkers like T'ang Chün-i” (195-204, 210).

²² Geoffrey York, “Beijing uses Confucius to lead charm offensive,” *Globe and Mail* (09/09/2005), A1, A8. For a discussion of the role of Confucius Institutes in promoting Chinese culture worldwide (and the connection between this type of promotion and China's increasing global influence), see Joshua Kurlantzick, Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): “Beijing now funds at least the first year of what it calls Confucius Institutes, Chinese-language and -culture schools created at leading local universities in countries from Kenya to South Korea to Uzbekistan to Australia. China plans to open at least one hundred Confucius Institutes around the world within the next five years. These Confucius Institutes are reminiscent of the British Council or the Alliance Française, which have helped promote British and French cultural brands without being explicitly linked, in people's minds, to Whitehall or the Elysée Palace. (The name Confucius Institute betrays no links to communism or to the Communist party, and actually repudiates Mao, since the Chairman had tried to wipe out the teaching of Confucian beliefs)” (68).

²³ Mentioned above (ff. 10).

the Chinese tradition of emperor veneration, although the scale of mass hypnosis during the Cultural Revolution was unprecedented in Chinese history. Similarly, the process of memorizing and reciting Mao's quotations is akin to the way Confucian classics were learned in the past. As Lucian Pye (1985) points out, the great man ideal "is an amplification of the Confucian model of the father as the ultimate authority in the family" (185). The cult of Mao was in many ways consistent with traditional Chinese culture rather than a radical departure from it.²⁴

As I am in utter agreement with her assessment, I realized that my own research required me to draw inspiration from scholars who adopt a similar hermeneutical viewpoint on the continued importance of China's historical context.

An excellent example of this application of Chinese historical realities to modern issues (in this case, to Mao Zedong himself) can be found in the academic output of James Chieh Hsiung, a Taiwanese-born scholar who has been an active force in modern Chinese studies for the last thirty-five years. In his persuasive Ideology and Practice: The Evolution of Chinese Communism, he offers a valuable corrective to the ahistorical approach taken by the scholars critiqued above. More specifically, in explaining his own motivations for producing the aforementioned tome, he states that it consists of an attempt "to interpret the Chinese Communist phenomenon by examining its intellectual roots."²⁵ His approach can be summarized as follows:

It is guided by the belief that past and present, old and new, and Chinese and Marxist are interrelated in a complex, organic whole and cannot be compartmentalized.... As part of modern China's prolonged process of cultural change, Chinese Communism has encountered the same set of problems that previously confronted other imported ideas and ideologies. They include *justification* (the need for cultural change), *equivalence* (the maintenance of cultural equilibrium amid the cultural borrowing), *congruence* between old and new, and *absorption* of borrowed elements into the indigenous culture.²⁶

In this way, Hsiung's approach exemplifies a "middle way" between traditionalism and ahistoricism by acknowledging both the continuities and the disjunctions between the (post)Maoist present and the classical Chinese past.²⁷ While this type of historically-

²⁴ Xing Lu, Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture and Communication, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 70-71.

²⁵ James Chieh Hsiung, Ideology and Practice: The Evolution of Chinese Communism, (New York: Praeger, 1970), 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.* (Emphasis original).

²⁷ The necessity of such an approach within the academic study of Maoism is further attested to by the fact that Mao himself acknowledged the historical and cultural context that he was operating within, a context developed through "the history of our great people over several millennia [, which] exhibits *national peculiarities* and many precious

contextualized study is certainly not unique within the study of Chinese religion (as exemplified in the research Adam Chau, Julia Ching, Jordan Paper, Mu-chou Poo, Richard von Glahn, and many others), my own research seems to be one of a very small number of studies that explore religious perspectives on Mao within the broader context of traditional Chinese culture.

Though Hsiung's approach is compatible with the ideological and methodological stances adopted by the present study, it contains two particular lacunae. First, it lacks analysis of the contemporary issues (namely the posthumous cult of Mao) introduced above – an unsurprising fact, given that it was published prior to the Chairman's death.²⁸ Second, it overstates the importance of political ideologies in the formation and maintenance of both the classical and Maoist social orders, choosing to privilege a “top-down” understanding of cultural development.²⁹ This emphasis is made at the expense of an in-depth discussion of religious, psychological, and cultural factors – especially in their popular manifestations.³⁰ Resultantly, the present study can be seen as something of a companion to Hsiung's work, as it explores popular manifestations of the Mao phenomenon and notes the means through which they were (and are) understood, practiced, and promulgated.

qualities” (Mao Zedong, *Lun Hsin Chieh-tuan*, quoted in Hsiung, 69). It was in this context that Mao argued for the necessity of a “concrete Marxism ... applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China” (*ibid.*).

²⁸ The text's historical context is forcefully established through the “framing questions” contained within its Concluding Remarks – “It remains to be seen whether the suppression of the Red Guard movement will leave any residue of cynicism about the methods and goals of Mao's revolution, and whether the thought of Mao will long survive Mao himself” (300).

²⁹ This omission is especially puzzling, given his observation that “there has been no sharp separation in China between the moral and religious spheres of life, on the one hand, and the social and political, on the other” (291). The porosity of these boundaries in the Chinese folk cosmology is discussed at length in chapter two. A detailed assessment of these issues in their classical context can be found in Roger Ames' The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) and Julia Ching's Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁰ For instance, Hsiung describes Confucianism as a “cultural-ideological” system that was replaced by Marxist/Maoist ideology (86-87). This is problematic for two reasons: first, it conflates ideology (which is a primarily intellectual and elite-centered phenomenon) with culture (an embodied, multivalent social reality that is participated in by all members of society); second, it denies the agency of the people in evaluating, modifying and (in some cases) rejecting the imposed ideology. This second issue (and the difficulties arising from it) is prominent in the discussion of the differences between the Chinese and Russian revolutions, where Hsiung opines that these differences can be attributed to economic and political problems and to ideological differences, utterly ignoring the cultural differences between the two groups (105). However, it should be noted that Hsiung adopts a somewhat idiosyncratic notion of Maoist “ideology” based upon its practical character, a fact that is discussed below and that mitigates this criticism to some extent.

A further result of my contact with Hsiung's work was the realization that the scholarly issues surrounding the historical Mao himself (as represented in biographies and speeches, as well as his written output (including philosophy, poetry, and policy statements)) are both too broad and too multifarious to be reasonably addressed in a study of this length – especially one that primarily focuses on public responses. As such, the particulars of Mao's character and his rule will not be addressed, save to the extent that they bear upon these public perceptions. While I acknowledge that this represents a gap in my own work, it is entirely in keeping with the present project's status as an initial investigation into the issues under discussion.

Culture as an Embedded (and Embodied) Phenomenon

As a corollary of the concerns highlighted above, the present study also aims to avoid falling into the intellectualist trap that ensnares many scholars when analyzing cultures with well-established traditions of elite and popular practice. In particular, while it is tempting to rely solely upon the discursive theories of social elites (as these theories are often the most readily accessible and clearly articulated), such an approach ignores the interactive and embodied elements of culture – elements that all members participate in and help to shape. For this reason, it is helpful to expand the scope to include an examination of ritual and popular narrative, as these two factors elegantly reflect the embodied, participatory and analogical nature of human intellection and interaction. Not only have these domains received increasing amounts of scholarly attention of late for their general utility in exploring cultural phenomena, but they also are particularly apt tools for providing insight into the popular Chinese context of the present study. Within this context, familiar images, symbols and rituals all become relevant, because they are all constituent elements of shared (popular) culture – a system of beliefs, practices and responses that are used by individuals in interpreting and evaluating the world around them.

There are two fundamental premises underlying this understanding of culture: first, that it is *instantiated*, and, second, that it is *functional* (as opposed to being constitutive). In brief, the first of these premises implies that culture is not an externalized, reified entity, but that it is instead a multiplicity of interrelated concepts instantiated in the minds of individuals. Describing this perspective, Dan Sperber notes: “cultures are the collective output of human mental abilities. In principle, then, cultural anthropology and psychology should have a close and fruitful

relationship. They will deal with outputs of the same general device: the human mind.”³¹ This cognitivist approach to culture, unlike many earlier perspectives,³² has a far easier time explaining creative uses of cultural materials,³³ in that the interpretation of these materials is embodied within the lived experience of individuals:

The tacit knowledge of a participant in a symbolic-cultural system is neither taught nor learned by rote. Rather each new participant in a system of cultural symbolism *reconstructs* the rules which govern the symbolic-cultural system in question. These reconstructions may differ considerably, depending upon such factors as the personal history of the individual in question.³⁴

In this way, the instantiated understanding of culture also provides insight into its *functionality*, as will be demonstrated presently.

Specifically, this cognitive approach allows for a clear understanding of the means by which cultural materials fulfill social and psychological functions – a fact that is elegantly represented through Ann Swidler’s metaphorical description of culture as a “toolbox.” This view suggests that an individual’s cultural inheritance can be fruitfully characterized as a learned body of beliefs, practices and behaviours that are utilized in response to the trials and tribulations of embodied existence. In “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” she describes this metaphorical toolbox as follows:

[It is] a general way of organizing action (depending upon a network of kin and friends, for example, or relying on selling one’s skills in a market) that might allow one to reach

³¹ Dan Sperber, quoted in E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 68. Theorists who follow this interpretation suggest that cultures can maintain their cohesiveness because, even in cases of incomplete or inadequate transmission, individuals tend to interpret cultural materials in highly predictable ways due to the underlying structure of the human mind. These “inference systems,” which govern the perception and interpretation of various fundamental realities of human life (including agency, biology, and physical causality), are described at length in Pinker (1997) and in Pascal Boyer, Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought, (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

³² For instance, Ann Swidler notes that the Weberian and Parsonian approaches turn individuals into “passive cultural dopes” through their contention that the primary purpose of culture is to provide value orientations (which then function as incentives towards adopting particular behaviors) (274). “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (April 1986), 273-286.

³³ These “cultural materials” can be understood in reference to Delwin Brown’s concept of “canons,” which he describes as “reasonably defined ‘spaces,’ bodies of material – texts, doctrines, symbols, rituals, and so on, or combinations of these – within which and with which ... negotiation is conducted. Negotiating identity in relationship to a canon is a process of employing the materials of canon – which necessarily means construing the canon in this way or that – as a framework in terms of which one understands oneself one’s social and natural world, and one’s place in it” (90). Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994).

³⁴ Lawson and McCauley, 68.

several different life goals. Strategies of action incorporate, and thus depend on, habits, moods, sensibilities, and views of the world (Geertz, 1973a). People do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put.³⁵

The notion of the cultural “toolbox” provides a meaningful account of the means by which cultures function – namely, by providing canonical vocabularies of symbols and actions that can be used in navigating the challenges of embodied, social existence.

The functional understanding of cultural materials outlined above has numerous points of correspondence with the “narrative turn” recently taken by many researchers in the humanities and social sciences.³⁶ This emerging interdisciplinary consensus centers on valorizing the central role of (personal and cultural) narratives in the formation and reinforcement of human minds and human societies, with the suggestion that stories serve explanatory, empathetic and constitutive purposes. Jerome Bruner, one of the most distinguished proponents of this theory, provides an excellent summary of this approach to narrative:

It has an available cultural tool kit or tradition on which its procedures are modeled, and its distributional reach is as wide and as active as gossip itself. Its form is so familiar and ubiquitous that it is likely to be overlooked, in much the same way as we suppose that the fish will be the last to discover water. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative-stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors. Unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, narrative constructions can only achieve “verisimilitude.” Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness although ironically we have no compunction about calling stories true or false.³⁷

³⁵ Swidler, 277.

³⁶ For an overview of this valorization of narrative, see David Maines, “Narrative’s Moment and Sociology’s Phenomena: Toward a Narrative Sociology,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 34:1 (1993). 17-38. For a detailed account of the relationship between Swidler’s view of culture and the narrative perspectives outlined below, see Christopher Jensen, “Religion and Ideology: Using Ann Swidler’s Theory of Unsettled Cultures to Explore the Notion of Religious Fundamentalism,” *Journal of Religion and Culture* 18/19 (2007). 135-157, 138-143.

³⁷ Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 18:1 (Autumn 1991), 1-21, 4-5.

This same principle was expressed somewhat more pithily by Thomas King, who began his Massey Lectures by stating, “The truth about stories is, that’s all we are.”³⁸

In this context, three principal features of narrative are relevant to the present discussion of culture: normativity, narrative accrual, and hermeneutic composability. The first principle describes the fact that narratives (whether shared or internalized) derive their dramatic impetus from the contravention of an ordered state (be it natural, social or moral), which means that they contain within themselves an (often implicit) account of this order.³⁹ As such, they represent means through which cultural norms can be challenged, inculcated or reified. The second principle, narrative accrual, describes the fact that narratives are inherently iterative and recursive, in that they both reference and redefine that which came before them. While this capacity is evidently important to the construction of coherent identities (as contained in internal autobiographical narratives), it is an equally important element of narrative as a cultural process:

What creates a culture, surely, must be a "local" capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure that permits a continuity into the present—in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy. ... The perpetual construction and reconstruction of the past provide precisely the forms of canonicity that permit us to recognize when a breach has occurred and how it might be interpreted.⁴⁰

The third principle (hermeneutic composability) refers to the fact that narratives (and, more broadly, the cultural materials out of which narratives are drawn) are inherently hermeneutical entities, by which I simply mean that they require interpretation. Moreover, the originators and disseminators of narratives have little-to-no control of the manner in which their accounts will be received, internalized and (potentially) reapplied.⁴¹ As Bruner suggests, “the word *hermeneutic* implies that there is a text or a text analogue *through* which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and *from* which somebody is trying to extract a meaning. This in turn implies that there is a difference between what is *expressed* in the text and what the text might *mean*, and furthermore that there is no unique solution to the task of determining *the* meaning for *this*

³⁸ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), *passim* (he uses this phrase to introduce each chapter).

³⁹ Bruner, 15-16.

⁴⁰ Bruner, 19-20.

⁴¹ Bruner, 7. For a discussion of this interpretative paradigm as it pertains to sociology, see Maines, 18-23.

expression.”⁴² All three of these elements (normativity, narrative accrual, and hermeneutic composability) will be utilized in our discussion of historical Chinese realities and their impingement upon modern (re)appropriations of Mao.

As a final addition to this discussion of culture, we must now turn to two varieties of cultural materials, both of which will be used in the analysis to follow: namely, metaphor and ritual. The topics are mentioned in tandem due to their functional similarities, as they are both means by which cultural patterns and tropes are transmitted and reified. In the case of metaphor, it suffices to note that the linguistic structures utilized by individuals to describe social realities offer profound insights into the functional and structural relationships between concepts (on levels of both psychology⁴³ and culture⁴⁴). These factors will be taken into account in chapter three, which explores the metaphorical and symbolic content of the modern religious

⁴² Bruner, 7. He goes on to consider the role of innate mental faculties in the hermeneutic endeavour: “The telling of a story and its comprehension as a story depend on the human capacity to process knowledge in this interpretive way. It is a way of processing that, in the main, has been grossly neglected by students of mind raised either in the rationalist or in the empiricist traditions. The former have been concerned with mind as an instrument of right reasoning, with the means we employ for establishing the necessary truth inherent in a set of connected propositions. ... Empiricists, for their part, rested their claims on a mind capable of verifying the constituent “atomic propositions” that comprised a text. But neither of these procedures, right reason or verification, suffice for explicating how a narrative is either put together by a speaker or interpreted by a hearer. This is the more surprising since there is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organizing human experience” (8-9).

⁴³ For an excellent overview of the psychological literature on this topic, including Lakoff and Johnson’s pioneering research into the pivotal role of metaphor in human cognition, see Edward Slingerland, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2004, 72 (1), 1-31. Therein, Slingerland argues that “human cognition – the production, communication, and processing of meaning – is heavily dependant on mappings between domains, with ‘mapping’ understood as ‘a correspondence between two sets that assigns to each element in the first a counterpart in the second’” (Gilles Fauconnier, quoted in Slingerland, 9). Intriguingly, current research is noting that many such mappings occur at a pre-linguistic level, such that “linguistic manifestations of cross-domain mappings are merely surface manifestations of deeper cognitive processes” (*ibid.*). This notion is entirely commensurate with Pinker’s empirical research into the storage, accession and utilization of “mentalese” representations in cognition (with linguistic representation as a second-order process) (69-70). Likewise, parallels can also be seen with the Chomskyan notion of “deep structures” (a hypothesis that he first explored in *Syntactic Structures*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1965)).

⁴⁴ For instance, Ning Yu, while acknowledging the fundamental role of metaphor in human psychology, offers the proviso to these primary experiences are then informed by culture: “The interaction between common bodily experiences and varied cultural experiences determines the extent to which conceptual metaphors are universal, widespread or culturally-specific. At the same time, the same basic embodied experiences, in which many conceptual metaphors are grounded, may be defined differently by different cultural beliefs and values ([as per] Gibbs, 1999). Also, our cultural models may be constructed metaphorically, thus framing our worldview metaphorically. As such, the relation between metaphor, body, and culture is extremely intricate, with all of them mingled together, and each of them penetrating the others, giving rise to a colorful spectrum of cognition” (14). , “Metaphor, Body, and Culture: The Chinese Understanding of *Gallbladder and Courage*,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 18(1) (2003), 13-31.

reinterpretations of Mao.⁴⁵ In the case of ritual, the present study reaffirms its importance in understanding human cultures, given its role in defining social roles and obligations,⁴⁶ creating, reaffirming and reifying cultural doctrines,⁴⁷ and reorienting life in light of an authoritative order.⁴⁸ Given that the entirety of chapter four is devoted to outlining a particular theory of ritual and utilizing these conclusions to interpret certain Mao-era rituals within the broader Chinese context, it is unnecessary to delve further into these matters at this time.

The understanding of culture outlined above, which acknowledges the importance of narrative, metaphor, ritual, and canonical discourse, and which notes the embodied and “cognitivist” character of culture, is particularly relevant to the present research due to the fact that it can meaningfully account for both cultural continuity and cultural creativity.⁴⁹ This makes it an ideal tool for exploring the religious interpretations of Mao in modern China, due to the fact that these interpretations often rely upon the application of traditional symbols and tropes in new settings and contexts.

Contra Orientalism (A Proviso)

The types of issues raised above enter potentially dangerous terrain, in that they could be construed as manifestations of Orientalist discourse – aiming to describe the Chinese as an “Other,” whose thought processes, by their very nature, are utterly different from those of

⁴⁵ While this perspective is evidently of tremendous interest to modern religious studies, as demonstrated in Edward Slingerland’s masterful application of these theories to the classical Chinese doctrine of *wu-wei* (Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)), I must admit that it was of slightly less utility in the present study, largely due to my own lack of confidence in my classical Chinese. As such, while I am more than willing to discuss large-scale, undisputable metaphors (e.g., “Mao as emperor”, “Mao as god”), my rudimentary skills in modern Chinese interfered with my ability to utilize this theory to its full potential. This being said, it certainly provides a fertile avenue for future research into this topic.

⁴⁶ As per Boyer, 250-263.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Roy Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 107-138. Similarly, Lawson and McCauley argue that the majority of religious rituals derive both their theoretical justifications and their epistemological interpretations from the symbolic-cultural system of the religion itself, 93-95.

⁴⁸ Bell, 169. See also Rappaport, who argues that “[f]or one who performs a ritual, ‘to act’ is to take an action that affirms or even brings into being a significant order and also states his acceptance of it. It may even transform that order or himself” (136).

⁴⁹ The notions of cultural continuity and cultural creativity are used extensively in the summary of the present research found in chapter five.

Westerners.⁵⁰ This is, of course, not a desirable outcome. Conversely, it is also undesirable to follow the evolutionary reasoning of early sociologists and anthropologists⁵¹ and to assume that Chinese rationality is *exactly* like its Western counterparts, as under that assumption the continued existence of magical/ritualistic thought (as seen in religious interpretations of Mao) could then simply be interpreted as primitive (and ultimately fallacious) rationality. Instead, it seems advisable to take a middle path between these two extremes.

Mary Douglas, in Natural Symbols, offers an approach that provides this type of intermediate perspective. Therein, she details a classification system whereby social groups can be categorized based on two axes – “group” and “grid” – where “[*grid*] is order, classification, the symbolic system” and *group* refers to “pressure, the experience of having no option but to consent to the overwhelming demands of other people.”⁵² She goes on to suggest that the role and function of ritual in societies will be determined by where they would be placed on these axes. For example, a society characterized by strong interpersonal bonds (“group”) will likely be “a ritualistic society,” with rituals focused on either expressing an “internal classification system” or reinforcing “group boundaries.”⁵³ In this way, if it can be demonstrated that Chinese social patterns or cultural psychology stress collectivism over individualism, Douglas’s theory suggests that both ritual and communal consensus will hold a more important place in their culture.

The collectivist orientation of Chinese society, frequently taken as a given by social scientists, has been objectively demonstrated through a number of recent empirical studies. In one, an analysis of the motivations affecting Chinese primary-school students, the researchers proposed the following conclusions:

Chinese students in Hong Kong are highly achievement oriented; compared to their western counterparts [and] they attach different values to achievement. Instead of worshiping individualism, collectivism is valued – family and group goals are considered more important than those of the individual.... In other words, the Chinese value was a

⁵⁰ A phrase that was coined and extrapolated upon in Edward Said’s Orientalism, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁵¹ Tylor, Frazer, et al. (discussed above).

⁵² Douglas, quoted in Bell, 43.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 45.

reflection of Confucian philosophy that advocates self-constraint and interactive, relational context for social beings.⁵⁴

In another study, this one concerned with the manner in which workers respond to supervisor feedback, postulated that responses would differ in collectivist and individualist countries. As such, their methodology required an empirical test to determine the interpersonal orientation of various cultures (in this case, Chinese and Dutch), which they utilized as follows:

[We] used Singelis's (1994) scale of interdependent self-construal, extended from 12 to 15 items, to measure collectivist orientation.... Examples of the items are, 'I would sacrifice my self interest for the benefit of the group I belong to'; 'If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible'; 'I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments'; 'I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor'; and 'I would stay in a group if they needed me, even if I was not happy with the group.' The construct validity of the measure of collectivist orientation is apparent from the relatively high score of the Chinese and the relatively low score of the Dutch ($M = .23$ vs. $M = -.56$; $t(428) = 17.12$, $p < .001$).⁵⁵

Given the plausible results of both of these studies (each of which draws upon an additional body of material for verification and confirmation), it seems reasonable to accept the scholarly consensus that Chinese society is, indeed, collectivistically oriented.⁵⁶

Though it would be ridiculous to postulate that any society (or any individual, for that matter) could be unilaterally assigned to a particular orientation within Douglas's framework (especially if such orientations are seen as binary, "is/is not" characteristics), it seems reasonable to suggest that cultural differences could manifest themselves by emphasizing certain modes of thought over others. Thus, the present study seeks to examine these cultural particularities, not as a means to highlighting divisions, but in the service of a broader, more nuanced perspective on specific cultural phenomena (such as the "cult of Mao") that have been characterized by some as foolish, incomprehensible or ironically bizarre. My efforts in this enterprise are aided by the

⁵⁴ Ping Liu, "Transition from elementary school to middle school and change in motivation: An examination of Chinese students," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*; Fall 2003; 18, 1, 71-83. 73.

⁵⁵ Evert van der Vliert, Kan Shi, et al., "Chinese and Dutch Interpretations of Supervisory Feedback," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 35:4 (July 2004), 417-435. 423.

⁵⁶ It should be noted, here as above, that this characterization is not meant to expostulate on irreconcilable differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Indeed, both the individualistic nature of Western cultures and the collectivist nature of the Chinese culture(s) are contested notions, as outlined in Moskowitz's "Magic Tricks, Midnight Grave Outings, and Transforming Trees: Performance and Agency in Taiwanese Religion" (25). However, the purpose of the above characterization is not to define the Chinese as "Other," but merely to highlight well-accepted cultural differences.

fact that ritual and narrative scholarship, in addition to their particular utility in the Chinese context, have been gaining ground of late as broadly applicable means of exploring human realities from a cross-cultural perspective.

Methodological Issues

Following the theoretical perspectives introduced above, the present study will follow a five-fold methodological approach. First, it follows the standard phenomenological method of religious studies, attempting to bracket experiences in order to critically explore “the meaning that the religious phenomena have for the believers themselves”,⁵⁷ and, when such bracketing is difficult or impossible, being aware of one’s own subjective emotional and conceptual baggage. It was such a perspective that motivated the sensitivity to Orientalist discourse discussed above. Second, the interaction between historical and modern Chinese realities will be explored using the comparative perspective detailed above, drawing upon such notable examples as Julia Ching, Mircea Eliade, Richard von Glahn, and others.⁵⁸ Third, the ritualistic elements of the Mao cult will be approached through a modified perspective informed by the theories of Catherine Bell, Pascal Boyer, Adam Chau, Roy Rappaport, Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley.⁵⁹ Fourth, this study will utilize the instantiated, narratological approach to culture described at length above. Though my need to improve my competence in the source language has presented a slight impediment to the usage of this technique, the metaphorical and narratological domains in question have been extensively described and studied in previous works, which makes such an approach tenable. Finally, given my extra-disciplinary interest in the social sciences, I have attempted whenever possible to ground my speculations in current scientific perspectives on human minds and human societies, drawing inspiration from such fields as psychology, neuroscience, anthropology and sociology.

⁵⁷ William Brede Kristensen, as quoted in George James, Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological Approaches of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 144.

⁵⁸ In drawing inspiration from Eliade’s methods, I remain grounded in my own concern with historicism, thus avoiding the danger of decontextualizing the phenomena under discussion.

⁵⁹ This perspective will be explored and applied in chapter four.

Conclusions

Cultural psychology, narrative and ritual each provide valuable insights into the puzzling phenomenon of Mao veneration in modern China. Though these cultic practices took (and continue to take) fairly standard forms (including the use of amulets, the talismanic application of holy texts, and the construction of temples), the fact that the nexus of these devotions is located in a recently deceased political leader is both etically and emically intriguing. The aim of the present study is to explore the cultural materials (including narratives, religious conceptual vocabularies, folk psychologies, and rituals) that make this phenomenon viable and meaningful. Some of the materials that will be of particular use in making this case include the traditional understanding of the continuity between god and emperor, the role of perceived efficacy in popular cults, the institution of Mao's charisma through ritual, and the porosity of the traditional Chinese cosmology (which draws only limited distinctions between the realms of gods and humans). All of these elements played a part in the seemingly spontaneous generation of the oft-mentioned religious devotions in the early 1990s, though I would argue that much of their perceived novelty can be attributed to a lack of attention to cultural precedents.

Finally (and in keeping with the valorization of narrative found above), I will conclude this introduction with a story that provides an anecdotal account of the continued symbolic power of Mao in modern China, as well as demonstrating the extent to which these issues remain consequential for Chinese people.

In the weeks leading up to the Tiananmen Massacre, three working-class Chinese peasants embarked upon a cross-country voyage to express their support for the students gathered in protest of the current administration. After the government declared martial law, the three men decided that it was time to act:

A few nights later, frustrated and worried they were missing a unique chance to push China toward democracy, the trio considered self-immolation in Tiananmen Square, but feared their suicides might be misinterpreted. Smoking and passionately debating what to do next, Mr. Lu's childhood friend, Yu Zhijian, a primary school teacher, glanced at the iconic portrait of Chairman Mao. "It's because his dark soul has never been vanquished!" Mr. Yu declared. "It's all his fault."⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Jan Wong, "This is China's tragedy: Dissident reveals what drove him to deface Mao," *The Globe and Mail* (Friday, June 2, 2006), A1 + A7. A7.

It was then that they concocted a plan to deface the Great Helmsman's luminous, iconic image, though their desire "not to commit violence" caused them to enclose the paint in eggshells instead of glass bottles.⁶¹

Their act of vandalism was not spontaneously or carelessly decided upon. In fact, once the men chose the form that their protest would take, they contacted their families and informed them that they would not be home again. Their assessment of the perils of their action was indeed accurate. After their brief moment of protest, the three rural men were arrested and imprisoned for over ten years (on average), where they were harassed, isolated and physically abused.⁶²

The scarred bodies and psyches of these protestors emphasize the fact that coming to terms with the disparate characterizations of Mao is not simply an intellectual exercise. Instead, it represents a deadly serious struggle for millions of Chinese citizens attempting to construct meaningful construals of their place within China (especially when "China" is understood as a historical, political and geographical entity). If the present work's exploration of the posthumous cult of the Chairman helps to provide insight into this complex, existential process, I will consider it to have been a successful and worthwhile endeavour.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Both the act of vandalism itself and the government's response indicate the extent to which Mao (as leader) remains a metonym of China.

Chapter 2: Traditional Chinese Understandings of Gods, Emperors and the Relationship between Them

While the previous chapter provides an introduction to the religious interpretations of Mao in modern China, this issue prompts a number of important questions: Why would such identifications and metaphors seem appropriate? Is there any historical precedent for ascribing divine status to a political leader? How were divinity and rulership construed in pre-modern China? Have these construals remained relevant into the modern day? The answers to some of these questions (in particular, those dealing with historical precedents) will be found in an exploration of the traditional understanding of gods and emperors – two categories that, by Western standards, seem utterly disparate. In contrast, I will argue that, within the largely efficacy-based tradition of Chinese popular religion, these two categories share certain profound similarities, particularly given their shared emphasis on spiritual potency (*ling* (靈) in the case of gods and *de* (德) in the case of political leaders). Once these parallels have been demonstrated, with especial attention paid to the Wittgensteinian “family resemblances” between these two powerful archetypes, these points of intersection will be used to shed light on the tropes and images drawn upon in religious descriptions of Mao.¹

In outlining the historical antecedents that will be utilized in the analysis of the Mao materials, my exploration will proceed as follows: first, I will outline the general character of Chinese popular religion, focusing particular attention on the roles of efficacy, narrative and pragmatism (elements that will be highlighted in the overview to follow); next, I will explore the means through which these foci characterize the traditional Chinese understanding of superhuman agents; finally, I will survey the traditional understanding of imperial power, noting the relevance of the previously developed efficacy framework, as well as other functional and metaphorical commonalities between gods and emperors. Once this survey is complete, it will then be possible to assess the meaning of these symbols when used in descriptions of Chairman Mao (as covered in chapter three), as well as to explore one of the primary means through which this efficacy is generated: namely, ritual (which will be discussed in chapter four).

¹ This topic provides the subject matter for chapter three.

Belief and Practice in Chinese Religiosity

Chinese religious belief, in both its ancient and modern guises, is typically characterized by a complex, multimodal understanding of mortality, spirituality and the cosmos – all of which are informed by certain ubiquitous principles (such as the notion of qi, yin/yang metaphysics and the relational view of self). While one could argue that these doctrinal foundations represent the most distinctive elements of the tradition, such an approach evidences a particularly Western concern with creedal statements and dogmatic beliefs as the *sine qua non* of a religious system. As such, many scholars of Chinese religion caution that this avenue of research ignores the fundamentally divergent emphases of Western and Sinic religiosity, with the latter being predominantly characterized in terms of ritual participation and its concomitant social effects.² For this reason, it is often argued that any theory which uncritically assumes the centrality of religious *belief* (in the doctrinaire, “spiritually monogamous” sense of the term) is conditioned by Western assumptions, and that, as a result, it is potentially unsuitable for discussing Chinese religion.

One means of avoiding this pitfall is to concentrate instead upon an economic approach to human religious activity: an understanding that was first posited by Adam Smith, which provides a valuable contrast to the more faith- or doctrine-based approaches often utilized in the academic study of religion. Unlike perspectives that tend to reify religions as logically discrete categories,³ the economic approach contends that the “costs and benefits of religious practice, like the costs and benefits of other forms of publicly observable behavior, can be at least identified and possibly measured.”⁴ This method dovetails nicely with sociological and

² These related topics will be addressed in considerable detail below and in the following chapter. The amorphous “many authors” mentioned above (who propound the notion of Chinese religion as defined by praxis, ritual participation and/or social utility) include Roger Ames, Catherine Bell, Adam Yuet Chau, Chad Hansen, Stevan Harrell, Jordan Paper, Mu-chou Poo, Henry Rosemont Jr., P. Steven Sangren, and Richard von Glahn – all of whom will be considered in more detail below. In compiling this brief list, it is intriguing to note the diversity of disciplines that have aided in the formation of this consensus on Chinese religiosity, as the scholars mentioned above have employed approaches as varied as anthropology, ethnography, textual analysis, archeology, sociology, philosophy and linguistics.

³ A tendency that is eloquently described in Jonathan Z. Smith’s “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Marc C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 269-284.

⁴ Gary M. Anderson, “Mr. Smith and the Preachers: The Economics of Religion in the *Wealth of Nations*,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 96: 5 (October 1988), 1066-1088. 1068. See also: Carl L. Bankston III, “Rationality, Choice and the Religious Economy: The Problem of Belief,” *Review of Religious Research* 43:4 (June 2002), 311-325; Carl L. Bankston III, “Rationality, Choice, and the Religious Economy: Individual and Collective Rationality

anthropological approaches to religion, as all three concentrate their attention on the visible, phenomenological components of religious traditions, surveying them both categorically and within a broader social / cultural context. Despite the fact that these perspectives allow religious phenomena to be analyzed based on their function(s) in the lives of adherents, they nevertheless suggest a rather important question: if religion (as a category of human behavior) is not explicitly tied to doctrinal commitments, how else can it be construed? Intriguingly, the Chinese materials themselves provide the answer to this theoretical question: namely, that religions are cultural systems that implicate extra-human⁵ forces in the attainment of personal and social ends.⁶

In examining current sociological, anthropological, and historical literature on popular religion in China, one is struck by the suggestion that faith and belief are secondary concerns, to the extent that an individual's decision to patronize a cult (through participation in prayers, sacrifices and other rituals) is predominantly based on the perceived efficacy of the extra-human agent(s) at the movement's core.⁷ This concern with efficacy means that the majority of traditional religious practices are focused on the attainment of harmony and prosperity for one's self and one's family, rather than professing faith in a deity (as is the case in many other theistic traditions). This approach to spiritual life is summarized in Mu-chou Poo's In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion – an exploration of ancient Chinese religiosity that outlines prominent beliefs and practices from prehistoric times to the Han dynasty. In it, Poo suggests that “the objective of all these [religious activities] was mainly personal welfare (that of the suppliant and/or his relatives), which was also a primary motivation for keeping worship and

in Supply and Demand," *Review of Religious Research* 45: 2 (December 2003), 155-171. These economic approaches are used extensively in the discussion of ritual found in Chapter 4.

⁵ Mu-chou Poo suggests that the term “extra-human” is an appropriate descriptor for the non-profane realm posited by Chinese religion (rather than the more common “superhuman” or “supernatural”). His reasoning is based upon the utter immanence of this spiritual realm: “[These powers] were not necessarily ‘super-natural’ – in the sense of ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ the natural world. They were not necessarily ‘superhuman’ either – in the sense of having greater power than man. Some amounted to no more than minor irritations and were effectively checked with the performance of exorcistic acts. While both ‘supernatural’ and ‘superhuman’ entail the sense of ‘superior,’ ‘better,’ or ‘stronger,’ the term ‘extra-human’ only refers to the sphere of existence of the powers without reference to their quality, strength, or nature” (6). In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁶ This active, performative understanding of religion can be seen as a corrective to the early modern views propounded by Tylor, Frazer and others, all of whom argued that religion consisted of *belief in* superhuman beings (rather than their function(s) in human lives). For a good summary of these early views, see Pals (1996). This praxical approach to defining religions is echoed in Lawson and McCauley, 5-6.

⁷ See, for example, Chau (2006); Harrell (1977); Poo (1998).

cults alive.”⁸ The continued relevance of this historical insight was confirmed by Willem Grootaers, Li Shih-Yü and Wang Fu-Shih’s fieldwork in Hebei province (ca. 1947), wherein they cataloged 640 rural and small-town temples. In their analysis, they discovered (in keeping with Poo’s statement) that the majority of religious activity involved importuning deities for aid in the achievement of this-worldly ends. In particular, they noted that approximately sixty percent of temple structures were explicitly devoted to prayers for worldly prosperity (a category that included agricultural productivity (38.3%), desire for wealth (10.5%), and desire for (/ protection of) offspring (10.5%)). Of the remaining temple structures, over fifteen percent were dedicated to providing protection against evil spirits, with another sixteen percent focused on protection from divine judgment:⁹

Second only to [cults centered on agricultural fertility] comes the preoccupation with the judgment of the soul. Actually we have seen that even the temples dedicated to rain gods show many reminders of *the god's power to chastize evil doers*. These two are by all counts the basic tenets and practices of the Chinese popular religion, as we found it in the surveyed areas.¹⁰

However, even the fear of supernatural punishment – a mainstay of many religious traditions – was approached in a largely “this-worldly” manner, with the vast majority of penalties meted out in the present (rather than in a hypothesized afterlife). Some of the most common ailments interpreted as divine punishments included sickness, infertility (or lack of male progeny), and agricultural troubles (such as drought or disease).

Though the ethno-geographical study summarized above is by no means a definitive proof of a particular tendency within Chinese religiosity, it represents a strong argument that the (efficacy-centric) character of traditional Chinese religion (as described by Poo, Sangren, Chau and others) persisted from the classical period into modernity. Additionally, it also provides a glimpse into the folk psychology of Chinese religion – a topic that will be addressed in more detail below. This digression is a necessary one, as it supports the present study’s focus on the perceived efficacy of extrahuman beings (and the means by which these conceptions generate religious goods) over the specifics of religious doctrine.

⁸ Poo, 7, 13, and *passim*.

⁹ Willem A. Grootaers; 李世瑜; 王輔世, "Rural Temples around Hsüan-Hua (South Chahar): Their Iconography and Their History," *Folklore Studies* 10: 1 (1951), 1-116. 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (*Emphasis added*).

In particular, many theorists argue that the related concepts of “belief” and “faith” are substantially less relevant to the practice of Chinese religions than they are in Western religious modalities. As Teiser suggests, individuals take part in Chinese religious ceremonies “without any necessary commitment to the existence of particular spirits.”¹¹ Likewise, Adam Chau notes:

During the course of my fieldwork in Shaanbei, however, I seldom encountered any explicit talk to “belief in deities.” Shaanbei people do have a word for the verb “believed” (*xiangxin*) as used in “I believe what you are saying,” but they do not say “I believe in the Black Dragon King” or “I believe in gods and goddesses.” Most important, they do not have the noun “belief” (as in “you have the right to hold your religious beliefs”) or “faith” to refer to the totality of their beliefs.¹²

This lack of concern with “belief” (as an existential stance) is also noted by Stevan Harrell, whose research among Taiwanese peasants evidenced a similar concern with religious efficacy over doctrinal issues:

I no longer consider the question of literal belief very important. What matters to the practical believers, the great majority of the informants questioned, is not whether the offerings they put out on deserted paths at night are actually eaten in some spiritual way by hungry ghosts, but whether by putting out such offerings, they can cure their children's lingering fevers. That more people are willing to profess belief in the efficacy of such offerings than will state that they believe ghosts exist is evidence that what people are looking for is not a true model but a workable model, a vision of reality which can serve as a useful guide to practical action. If diseases can be cured by acting *as if* ghosts exist, fine – no need to worry about whether they actually exist or not.¹³

While it could be argued the argument quoted above is slightly sophistical,¹⁴ Harrell's extensive research into Taiwanese folk religion does support the general contention that individuals within the Chinese religious context privilege perceived spiritual potency over particular doctrinal or theological belief concerning these deities.¹⁵ This conjecture is offered considerable support by

¹¹ Stephen F. Teiser, “Introduction: The Spirits of Chinese Religion” in *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3-37. 23. See also: Arthur P. Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974). 131-182. 160.

¹² Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 60-61.

¹³ Harrell (1977), 64.

¹⁴ As Dr. Lorne Holyoak rightly pointed out, the above argument is based on a slightly untenable definition of “belief,” given that it describes individuals acting “as if” otherworldly phenomena existed. In this particular context, it is impossible to say that the participants in folk religion “lack belief” because their actions, if anything, denote a conviction that their ritual participation is in some way efficacious (as such participation would otherwise be largely meaningless) (personal communication).

¹⁵ Adam Chau explores this position in great detail in *Miraculous Response*, where he suggests that “the single most important concept in understanding the Shaanbei deity-worshiper relationship is *ling* (magical efficacy). It refers to

the following thought experiment. Imagine conducting a survey of North Americans (regardless of religious affiliation) that asked the following two questions: a) do you believe in god(s) and b) do you believe that prayer/ritual has a measurable effect on worldly existence. In this hypothetical survey, it is absurd to imagine that the second question would receive more positive replies than the first, though this seemingly counter-intuitive result was in fact demonstrated amongst Harrell's Chinese respondents.¹⁶ While this does not prove that Chinese practitioners of folk religion do not "worry about whether [ghosts/gods] actually exist or not," it does demonstrate that such questions are not of primary importance.

All of this is not to say that the practitioners of Chinese worship do not believe in the gods that they sacrifice to, but that these "beliefs" are couched in (and determined by) the profoundly interpersonal framework of indigenous religiosity. Within this context, religious participation plays out like an unimaginably complex poker game, where all players must contend not only with what they believe but also with what they think their fellow players believe and what they believe their fellow players believe that they believe (*ad infinitum*), such that it is impossible to determine the epistemological context of their religious participation.¹⁷ Though this trait could be ascribed to all socially embedded belief systems, it is particularly relevant in the case of Chinese popular religion because of its central focus on spiritual potency, especially when one notes that this perceived potency is generated at the nexus point between personal experiences and shared narratives.

the ability of the deity to respond (*ying*) to the worshiper's problems, for example, curing an ill family member, point to the right direction for conducting business, enlightening one on a knotty personal dilemma, bringing ample rain after a bad drought, and so forth. Therefore, we can characterize the Shaanbei popular religion as essentially a *religion of efficacious response (lingying)*" (emphasis original) (64).

¹⁶ In particular, Harrell's 1977 study found that 67% of respondents agreed that "some illnesses [are] caused by malevolent spiritual beings" and that "gods will respond to requests for favors," while 52% agreed that a "soul exists after death" and only 43% acknowledged the existence of ghosts (one of the most common types of "malevolent spiritual beings") (61). As can be seen, these responses argue for a statistically significant emphasis on perceived efficacy (whether benevolent or malevolent) over theological/doctrinal beliefs.

¹⁷ The metaphorical encapsulation of interpersonal reasoning as a poker game is explicitly discussed in David Mamet's "Six Hours of Perfect Poker" in *Jafsie and John Henry: Essays*, (New York: Free Press, 1999). A similar point is made in Roy Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): "To say that in performing a canon the participant accepts whatever conventional understandings, principles, rules or procedures it encodes is simply to say that he has obligated himself to abide by its terms regardless of his private opinions and feelings about them" (134).

As such, in the context of Chinese popular religion, belief is not a religious good in and of itself. Instead, it is only meaningful (or perhaps only *existent*) when it is directed at a deity who has the capacity to effect change in the world – a capacity that is largely determined at the level of interpersonal consensus. As Adam Chau notes, this consensus is established primarily through narratives of efficacy:

People's experience of *ling* [spiritual potency] is real and is a social fact. A deity is *ling* because people experience his power and therefore say that he is *ling*. One deity is more popular and more 'powerful' than another because more people say that first one is more *ling*. ... An allegedly powerful deity whom a person has nonetheless never consulted is without significance to this particular person.¹⁸

In this way, shared popular narratives concerning spiritual efficacy largely displace elite doctrines as devices for the comprehension, promotion, and legitimation of religious movements.^{19 20} Moreover, given the central role of narrative in the related processes of self-creation (as defined by Bruner) and enculturation (as described by Swidler), the value of these experiences and anecdotes as religious goods increases exponentially. Intriguingly, just as these narratives of efficacy are central to the development and flourishing of popular cults, we will see a similar focus on this type of narrative in the posthumous assessments of Mao described in chapter three.

Given the related emphases on ritual, communal consensus and narratives of efficacy, the question of whether the Chinese “have faith” might be a meaningless one when they themselves

¹⁸ Chau, 65. To a similar end, Marc Moskowitz's ethnographic exploration of religious belief in a Chinese village also notes the central position held by these narratives of efficacy: “Mrs. Li told me several accounts that led her to believe that Daoist Master Bob was legitimate. He had predicted that another couple would get pregnant and the exact day that the woman would give birth. ... Mrs. Li [also] said that the fact that he had three thousand followers in such a small temple must have meant that he had great power. According to Mrs. Li, he had only lived in Gaoxiong for eight years. He used to live in Hualian, a smaller city on the East Coast, but moved because the gods told him there were many ghosts that needed taking care of in Gaoxing. ... As we crossed a large bridge, they told me that there used to be many fatal car accidents there. Daoist Master Bob told them that he had begun protecting it and that if they did not believe him they could check the accident records to see how drastically reduced the accidents were on the bridge” (22).

¹⁹ Another important element in the promotion and legitimation of religious observances is ritual participation, as this modality generates non-discursive religious experiences that can, in turn, reinforce shared religious narratives. This phenomenon is discussed in detail in chapter four.

²⁰ This is not to deny the role of elite doctrines entirely, as imperial promotion certainly lent an air of authority to one cult over another (as described at length in my paper “Gods, Saints and Hegemonies: The Hierocratic Control of Religious Observance in Medieval Catholic Europe and Song China” (*currently unpublished*)). However, I would argue that it was the reception and promulgation of popular narratives that ultimately determined whether a cult would ever develop the salience (and, hence, the popularity) necessary to warrant official attention.

(and those around them) are consistently participating in practices that define their social and cultural selves in light of the purported influence of the extra-human realm upon human affairs.²¹ Thus, they could be said to “believe” in the pragmatic truth of these spiritual beings, in a Jamesian sense,²² without these beliefs ever taking on the definitional and categorical qualities required by monotheistic Western faiths. Intriguingly, this pragmatic perspective accords precisely with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s discovery that even the “doctrinal” traditions of the West were, in historical terms, far more concerned with action and intention than the profession of particular dogmas.²³ As such, I would suggest that it is this pragmatic understanding of belief (rather than the untenable position that the Chinese had “no beliefs”) that is implicitly or explicitly adopted by the authors quoted above.²⁴

While the paragraphs above cannot be credited with unraveling the methodologically thorny (and philosophically multivalent) question of belief, they have nonetheless highlighted a

²¹ For instance, Xunzi, a pre-Qin Confucian philosopher, espouses a perspicaciously “social scientific” understanding of (religious) ritual, noting that participation helps to praxically indoctrinate participants with appropriate responses for participation in civilized society: “If the plumb line is properly stretched, then there can be no doubt about crooked and straight; if the scales are properly hung, there can be no doubt about heavy and light; ... and if the gentleman is well versed in ritual, then he cannot be fooled by deceit and artifice. The line is the acme of straightness, the scale is the acme of fairness, ... and rites are the highest achievement of the Way (*dao*) of man. Therefore, those who do not follow and find satisfaction in rites may be called people without direction, but those who do follow and find satisfaction in them are called men of direction” (Section 19) in Burton Watson’s Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967). 95. See also: Paper, 10, 47-50, for a discussion of the role of ritual in defining and maintaining social roles. These insights will be discussed in detail in the present study’s chapter on ritual.

²² In using this phrase, I am relying upon William James’ conception that the pragmatic utility of propositions (which is defined by their compatibility with lived experience) is the hallmark of truth, such that “the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief” and “the true ... is only the expedient in our way of thinking” (233). William James, quoted in Susan Haack’s “The Pragmatist Theory of Truth,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 27:3 (September 1976), 231-249. Thus, if participation in rituals literally *does* achieve various social / cultural results (as will be demonstrated in chapter 4), it is ridiculous, in the Jamesian sense, to suggest that the participants would deny the truth or reality of these deities. As Dr. Lorne Holyoak noted, not explicitly positing a belief is not logically equivalent to positing a lack of belief (personal communication, November 15, 2007). This perspective is echoed in Ellen Kappy Suckiel, “A Pragmatic Approach to Folklore: Suggestions in a Jamesian Mode,” *Western Folklore* 44:4 (October 1985), 311-317.

²³ In particular, Smith’s seminal Belief and History (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977) argues that the Western understanding of belief, based as it is on the Enlightenment/scientific worldview, is a relatively recent development. In defending his central thesis, he summarizes it as follows: “But I have not said that religious people have not ‘believed’ things in this sense. *What I have said is that until recent times no one affirmed that it was religiously important to believe them.* ... Neither the creeds (surprisingly!) nor the Bible (surprisingly!) have anything to say about believing. Is it not significant to establish this? That those who wrote each believed something, I did not and do not deny. To make their believing central, however, and to mistranslate what they did say as if they themselves thought believing important, is to misunderstand religious history” (249). Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Belief: A Reply to a Response,” *Numen* 27: Fascicle 2 (December 1980), 247-255. Emphasis added.

²⁴ This is why Chau, for instance, stresses the necessity of exploring “belief” in a wider cultural context, rather than seeing it as a *de facto* analogue for general religious sentiment (59-61).

number of important elements of Chinese folk psychology, especially as it pertains to religious observance. In particular, the focus upon efficacy, ritual, narrative and communal consensus (over individualistic “faith”) discussed above have informed the following excursus by leading me to privilege the perceived cultural, social and economic *functions* of Chinese theologies over the specifics of their ontological or cosmological schemas.^{25 26}

The Role and Function of Extrahuman Beings in Chinese Religious Systems

One of the most influential analyses of Chinese religiosity (in general) and folk theology (in specific) was performed by Arthur Wolf in his 1974 essay “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors” – an exhaustive study based upon his own fieldwork in Taiwan. In it, he exposts a typology of Chinese divinity whereby supernatural entities are broadly categorized into the three titular groups (ghosts, gods, or ancestors), with the notable proviso that membership in a given category is largely based upon a being’s perceived relationship with (and impact upon) its human constituents.²⁷ Further, he notes that this multivalent tendency is appreciable on both the temporal and social axes, with some beings changing their identification over time (transforming from ghost to god, or vice-versa) and others simultaneously existing as gods to some and ghosts to others.²⁸ This multivalency also extends to the differences between gods and ancestors, as the

²⁵ To this end, the present study accepts the Durkheimian notion of social functionalism (as described in Whitney Pope’s “Durkheim as a Functionalist,” *Sociological Quarterly* 16:3 (Summer 1975), 361-379), albeit with the proviso that societies provide multiple cultural solutions to any given problem (as per Swidler (1986)).

²⁶ The remainder of the present chapter outlines the role of spiritual efficacy (and the religious goods generated through it) in the popular understanding of gods and emperors. On the other hand, ritual, which is one of the primary means through which this efficacy is generated, will be considered at length in chapter four. This examination will explore classical perspectives and modern theories, and note their manifestations in the rituals performed by the modern cult of Mao.

²⁷ Arthur P. Wolf, “Introduction” to *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, edited by Arthur Wolf, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 1-17. 7. See also, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors” (same volume), 131-182. In particular, he argues that while “ghosts are propitiated, gods and ancestors are honored; ancestors are worshiped ‘because one owes them something’, gods and ghosts are worshiped ‘so they will help and not cause trouble’” (7). This point is also centrally important to Stevan Harrell’s “When a Ghost Becomes a God,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, edited by Arthur Wolf, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 193-206, which argues for a similarly functionalistic stance: “the great majority... are concerned less with the logical coherence of their religion than with its practical efficacy... [If a spirit] answers requests and grants favours, then it matters little what his origin is or what a religious specialist might say about his position in the supernatural social order” (204).

²⁸ Wolf, 172-174. This multivalency is also attested to in the categorization of the dead as ghosts or ancestors: “Whether a particular spirit is viewed as a ghost or as an ancestor depends on the point of view of a particular person. One man’s ancestor is another man’s ghost” (Wolf, 146). As such, the difference is understood in terms of familial and ritual obligations (the Confucian *li*): “The ancestor, though dead, is a person with rights and duties; ... the ghost, also dead, is a person with neither rights nor duties. The one is usually a kinsman; the other is always a stranger” (ibid.). See also Harrell (1974), *passim*.

lineages of many deities can be traced to the lives of euhemerized worthies. Demonstrating this, Wolf calls upon the example of the City Wall God – a regional deity whose post is most often held by deceased individuals promoted to the position by temporal authorities:

Although some tales of the god's origin give him a specific identity, most people now treat Ch'eng Huang [the City God] as a position rather than a person. For example, deceased notables are often assigned the status of Ch'eng Huang. Ch'ü T'ung-tsu identifies the Ch'eng Huang of Lou hsien in Kiangsu as a former magistrate, Li Fu-hsiang, who died there in 1669 (Chü 1962: 311), and, according to Florence Ayscough, the god governing Shanghai is a former member of the Hanlin Academy, Ch'in Yü-poi, who was assigned to his present position by the founder of the Ming Dynasty (Ayscough 1924: 140-41).²⁹

Though Wolf's research acknowledges the individual mythologies and hagiographies pertinent to each spiritual being, these pseudo-biographical narratives take a secondary position relative to accounts of the deity's perceived efficacy³⁰ – a revelation that supports the largely functionalistic theory of religious economy introduced above.

Though Wolf's conclusions have been expanded upon in the years since their publication, their fundamental insight that the perceived character of Chinese spirits (*shen*) is largely determined by their functional relationship with the various members of a human community (rather than explicitly doctrinal or mythological concerns) is of paramount significance to the present study. In order to utilize these conclusions, however, it is first necessary to acknowledge some lacunae in Wolf's analysis. First, though he notes the indigenous distinction between “sage gods” (*fu*) and “official gods” (*shi*),³¹ his account considers the latter category to the virtual exclusion of the former.³² Likewise, he also fails to address those deities that are more explicitly associated with a specific religious tradition (such as the Buddhist Guanyin and the Three Pure

²⁹ Wolf, 140.

³⁰ Wolf, 140 and *passim*. For an in-depth discussion of the ritual elements present in the cult of the City God (including the ritualized interactions between spiritual and human bureaucrats), see Angela Zito's “City Gods and their Magistrates” in Religions of China in Practice, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 72-81.

³¹ The first of these categories corresponds to the notion of “unruly gods” (i.e., non-hierarchical beings who allow direct access to religious goods) described in Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller's “Introduction: Gods and Society in China” in Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China, edited by Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996). 1-36.

³² The only mention of this categorization can be found on the bottom of page 140, though he immediately dismisses the necessity of discussing it by stating that “most layman, though aware of this distinction, do not trouble much about it” (Wolf, 141).

Ones of institutionalized Daoism),³³ as well as the difficult-to-classify zoomorphic deities of the popular and shamanic pantheons.³⁴ As a result, it is necessary to ascertain that this same pragmatic concern with spiritual efficacy can be detected in the cults of various “god-types” not considered by Wolf before it would be justifiable to make use of his conclusions in the present project.³⁵

Buddhist Deities

In the quest to demonstrate the ubiquity of the efficacy framework described above, we first turn to its role within Chinese Buddhism. While many influential studies have explored the complex interaction between Buddhism and indigenous Chinese religious thought,³⁶ a considerable majority of them concentrate on the development of particular schools and doctrines rather than cataloguing the process of doctrinal and praxical cross-fertilization that occurred between these traditions and popular religious pantheons and practices. In addition to the well established Sinicization of Buddhist doctrines and deities,³⁷ there is also considerable evidence for the contention that these Buddhist deities, much like their indigenous counterparts, came to be relied on for their provision of particular religious goods to their adherents. One example can be seen in the miracle tales of Guanshiyin, the “Bodhisattva who Observes the

³³ It should be noted that many of my conclusions on the functionalistic elements of Daoist and Chinese Buddhist practice were presaged by Jordan Paper, who notes that “popular practices understood to be related to Daoism usually have pragmatic ends” and that “the Buddhist goal of nirvana in China became amalgamated with rituals directed toward departed members of the family and toward material benefits in this life” (9-10). The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

³⁴ As described in Terry F. Kleeman’s “Expansion of the Wen-ch’ang Cult” in Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 45-73. 49.

³⁵ Though one could argue that the efficacy framework is sufficiently accounted for in Wolf’s research, I think that it is considerably more compelling to demonstrate its ubiquity through an analysis of sources from various traditions and time periods (i.e., using both ethnographies and historical sources). In this way, when similar factors can be seen in the interpretation of the Mao materials, they can be seen as manifestations of a prevalent cultural pattern.

³⁶ Two of the most venerable of these studies are Erik Zürcher’s The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959) and Kenneth K. S. Ch’en’s The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973). During a personal conversation, Dr. Thomas Selover noted that the very titles of these two works encapsulate the terms of the debate: was China “conquered” by Buddhism or did Buddhism “transform” in China? As with virtually all such dichotomies, it seems likely that the reality was somewhere between these two extremes.

³⁷ One notable development in this process was the “particularization” of salvation, which generally comes to be described in terms of family and community instead of country and cosmos. Likewise, the hagiographies of various bodhisattvas were also updated to highlight the exemplary filial piety of these beings prior to (or even following) their apotheoses – a process of formalization that is also evidenced in the earthly biographies of other Chinese deities. See Ch’en, 14-50, for an extensive discussion of the evolution of Buddhist thought and practice that allowed it to eventually incorporate traditional Chinese ethics (most particularly filial piety).

Sounds of the World” (an early Chinese characterization of Avalokitesvara). In these accounts, the earliest of which can reliably be dated to the late fourth century, Guanshiyin is credited with averting all forms of misfortune (e.g., saving the unjustly imprisoned, rescuing those lost at sea, and curing various illnesses).³⁸ In all cases, all that is required from the individuals concerned is a sincere request for aid and a promise to perform a certain number of meritorious deeds in the future.³⁹ Likewise, the bodhisattva Guanyin (the feminine characterization of the same deity) was similarly credited with the ability and inclination to intercede in the this-worldly troubles of her patrons, including the desire for male offspring. As in the Guanshiyin sutra described above, editions of the *Sutra of White-Robed Guanyin* were often book-ended by various accounts of the goddess’ miraculous powers, some examples of which are reproduced below:

Zheng Zhili of Pujiang, Mao District (province unspecified), was forty years old and still had no heir. In 1207 he decided to print 5,048 copies of this sutra and distribute the copies for free. On the seventh day of the eighth month in 1208 a son was born to him.

Yu Muzhai and his wife Wang of Danyang Village in Maoyuan County (province unspecified) decided to have one thousand copies of this sutra printed and distributed free. In the eighth month of 1250 when the work of distributing was only half completed, a son arrived.

Fangyan and wife Wang of Yungfeng Village, She County (in present Anhui province) decided to chant this sutra 5,048 times and print one thousand copies for free distribution in the spring of 1254. They had a son in 1255 and named him Wanggu.⁴⁰

In addition to demonstrating the types of interventions that were typically requested of Guanyin, the above quotation also demonstrates the extent to which this spiritual economy was understood in reciprocal terms. In particular, it is notable that human devotions (such as sponsoring the

³⁸ Robert Ford Campamy, “The Earliest Tales of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin,” *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 82-96. In addition to an overview of the subject, Campamy’s article also contains a translation of various miracle tales credited to the deity. In particular, see #1, #2 (86-87) for accounts of salvation from imprisonment, #6, #7 (89-90) for accounts of maritime rescues, and #8, #12, #13 (90, 93) for accounts of miraculous cures.

³⁹ In fact, the vast majority of these miracle tales were compiled at the behest of grateful patrons, who often vowed to underwrite the monastic production of these texts. As Campamy notes, “recording and spreading these tales was itself an act of merit, for it encouraged others to join in devotion of Guanshiyin.” Further, “the authors seem to have wanted to authenticate the fulfillment of the sutras’ promises in order to show that the sutras were true and that the practices they enjoined were efficacious. This is suggested most clearly by the fact that the authors sometimes directly quoted a passage from the *Guanshiyin Sutra* (or some other sutra concerning Guanshiyin) that seemed directly relevant to the particular miraculous event” (85). It should be noted that this genre of miracle account, whether expressed orally or textually, represents a central element in the promotion of Chinese cults, both in the classical milieu (as per Shahar and Weller (1996)) and in the modern day (Chau (2006)).

⁴⁰ Chün-fang Yü, “A Sutra Promoting the White-robed Guanyin as Giver of Sons,” *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 97-105. 101.

production of religious texts) were often contingent upon the provision of particular religious goods.

The cases of Guanshiyin and White Robed Guanyin described above provide ample evidence of the adaptation of Buddhist deities to the “spiritual economy” of indigenous Chinese religiosity, within which these (typically transcendent) figures are considered immediately present enough to be beseeched for progeny, miraculous cures, and the cessation of persecution.

Daoist Deities

Unlike the Buddhist deities described above (a group whose incorporation into Chinese religious thought can be dated with considerable precision), the majority of the *shen* included in the Daoist pantheon cannot be easily distinguished from the mass of popular spirits.⁴¹ Indeed, it could be argued that such a distinction would be largely meaningless, as existing literature evidences both the incorporation of “folk” deities into Daoist ritual⁴² and the presence of explicitly “Daoist” deities in the pantheons of Chinese folk worship.⁴³ However, it seems reasonable to characterize certain deities – such as the Three Pure Ones (*San Qing*) – as more explicitly Daoist, given that they are only infrequently venerated outside of explicitly Daoist liturgies.⁴⁴

⁴¹ In general, scholars of Chinese religion have proposed two disparate approaches to the issue of the Daoist pantheon. On one hand, certain scholars aver that virtually all deities not explicitly associated with other traditions (e.g., Buddhism) can be classified as Daoist – an approach that renders Daoism nearly synonymous with folk religion. This approach can be seen in Kristofer Schipper's *The Taoist Body*, translated by Karen C. Duval, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Conversely, others suggest that the pantheon is largely undifferentiated, such that the attempt to divide the various expressions of Chinese religiosity into sects is largely artificial. This second approach is adopted by Paper (1995) and Laurence Thompson (*Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989)). The current study sides with the latter opinion, with the near-universally accepted proviso that certain deities feature more prominently in the practices and liturgies of one school or another. One justification for this position is the ubiquity of the efficacy framework currently under discussion.

⁴² For example, Schipper (1993) provides an extended account of the ritual procedures utilized by a Daoist priest for the purpose of offering supplication to the Jade Emperor (the ruling deity of Chinese popular religion's celestial bureaucracy), 87-88.

⁴³ For instance, see Michael R. Saso's description of a particular folk shrine where the place of honor (which typically houses the icons of Mazu, Tudi Gong, and the City God) was instead occupied by the Three Pure Ones, an austere trinity of idealized Daoist concepts that will be discussed in more detail below. “The Taoist Tradition in Taiwan,” *The China Quarterly* 41 (January-March 1970), 83-102. 88. However, it should not be assumed that this was a typical finding, as the author notes that it “was like no temple I had even seen before” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁴ This characterization is supported by the paucity of temples dedicated to these overtly Daoist deities, as attested to by the fieldwork of Grootaers, et al. (quoted above). In their exhaustive inventory of the religious sites of the area, they examined 640 “independent temple buildings,” of which only *one* was dedicated to the Three Pure Ones. This singular devotional site was unsurprisingly located on the grounds of a Daoist monastery. Laozi, another

When examining the *San Qing*, we are confronted with the first group of *shen* that seem to violate the functionalistic model of divinity posited above. As Hymes notes, “the Three Pure are divine abstractions – hardly even gods in any very concrete sense – who hold the highest position in Taoist cosmology.”⁴⁵ In his view, their exalted (transcendent) status, coupled with their nebulous characterizations,⁴⁶ seems to “make any specific cult to them irrelevant.”⁴⁷ In contrast to Hymes’ rather dismissive assessment,⁴⁸ further exploration reveals that certain religious practices involve even these austere spiritual beings within the economy of Chinese religiosity. The difference however is that their aid typically depends upon the intercession of human intermediaries – in this case the *Dao shi* (Daoist priests). For instance, certain rituals intended to exorcise evil spirits and mitigate the spread of epidemics were predicated on the correct propitiation of these beings by religious professionals.⁴⁹ Further, the efficacy of various other rituals was assumed to depend on their (implicit or explicit) participation, resulting from a

unequivocally Daoist deity, likewise had only two specific temples dedicated to him, though he was occasionally depicted as an attendant to other more popular deities, such as Ma-wang (the Lord of Horses) and Huo-shen (the God of Fire). 2, 3-4, 6, 98-99. Saso’s article also describes a single instance of the veneration of the Three Pure Ones (88-90).

⁴⁵ Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). 39.

⁴⁶ As summarized by Saso, the Three Pure Ones include the “Highest Pure One,” “Jade Purity,” and “Ultimate Purity” (88), each of whom are understood in both mythological/ideational and euhemeristic terms: “In the abstract they are a three-fold manifestation of the Tao, which cannot be expressed in one word, or in many words, for that matter. Thus the central figure, Yüan-shih t’ien-tsun or Primordial Heavenly Worthy is the Tao in its creative aspect; the second figure to the left of the Yüan-shih, named “Ling-pao Heavenly Worthy” means the Tao as governing the world. Ling has the significance of heaven and spirit, pao means the earth and its realm. The third figure is the Tao as in man, and therefore by concrete application is that very first of all Taoist immortals, Lao-tzu himself” (88-89 ff. 15). In a more concrete sense, they are also associated with living personages, such that “the Jade Pure One is called Chang Hua-tzu; the Highest Pure One is named Liang Wei-tzu, and the Ultimate Pure One is named Lao-tan” (*ibid.*). Likewise, Schipper suggests that the *San Qing*, when interpreted metaphysically, are understood to be “hypostases of the Three ch’i [qi] of the Three Heavens” (362 ff. 33). “The Taoist Body,” *History of Religions* 17:3/4, Current Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Religions, (February - May 1978), 355-386.

⁴⁷ Hymes, 39.

⁴⁸ However, it should be noted that the cult of the Three Pure Ones (or the lack thereof) can be viewed as exceptions that prove the rule. As seen above, these deities *do* play an avowedly minimal role in traditional beliefs and practices. The above exceptions merely demonstrate that the functionalist/economic thesis proposed above holds, even in this atypical case.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Ch’en Hsiang-ch’un’s description of an apotropaic talisman meant to ward off epidemic illnesses that calls upon the *San Qing* with the following invocation: “The Taoist Triad orders that the spirit be killed” (39). “Examples of Charm against Epidemics with Short Explanations,” *Folklore Studies* 1 (1942), 37-54. In addition to the notable fact that this artifact evidences the Pure Ones being referred to directly, it also demonstrates the porous nature of the boundary between the human and extra-human realm (such that illness is seen as the activity of malevolent spirits). The ritualized particulars of these invocations were both exactly specific and surprisingly corporeal, as seen in the (mythical) instructions on the correct performance of a rite to summon the divinized Laozi: “Concerning the bell, it represents the Three Pure Ones. Therefore, when holding the bell, one uses three fingers, the first one being the Jade Pure (Yü-ch’ing), the second the Most Pure (Shang-ch’ing), and the third one the Great Pure (T’ai-ch’ing). If one does not hold the bell properly, why, one might invoke up to ten Pure Ones!” (39). Kristofer Schipper, “Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45:1 (November 1985), 21-57.

cosmological schema that placed them at the apex of the Daoist pantheon.⁵⁰ In this way, even the most austere, transcendent deities of the Daoist pantheon can be seen to exist within the efficacy framework, albeit as spiritual beings that often required special sanction or training to supplicate.

Zoomorphic (and Other Non-“Human”) Deities

The final category of deities that I will assess for the presence of the efficacy framework are those zoomorphic (and otherwise non-(formerly) “human” beings) that exist in various Chinese pantheons. Fortunately, the postulated focus upon the provision of spiritual goods is remarkably ubiquitous, whether one examines the auspicious role of the snake in Chinese folklore,⁵¹ the historical propitiation of locust deities,⁵² or the prevalence of sacrifices to nature spirits evidenced in inscriptions from the Shang dynasty.⁵³ In general, the characterization of these beings is indeed determined almost entirely by virtue of their perceived detrimental or beneficial interactions with human communities.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ It should be noted that this bureaucratic role is often ceded to the more popular Jade Emperor. Chau, 72; Schipper (1993), 87. However, these two construals of the pantheon are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as some rituals are predicated on both the cosmology of the Three Pure Ones and the popular cosmos governed by the Jade Emperor. For instance, Saso observed a ritual that began with the lighting of lamps beneath the icons of the San Qing (commemorating the creation account in Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*), and culminated in an invocation to the Jade Emperor (99 ff. 35). This shared primacy (at least in the realm of ritual) is also attested to by Shih-Shan Susan Huang in her description of a thirteenth century manual of Daoist ceremonies: “As labeled in the diagram, the noblest gods on the north wall included the Three Pure Ones (Sangqing), the Heavenly Emperor (Tianhuang), and the North, South, and East Poles (Beiji, Nanji, Dongi)” (13). “Summoning the Gods: Paintings of Three Officials of Heaven, Earth and Water and Their Association with Daoist Ritual Performance in the Southern Song Period (1127-1279),” *Artibus Asiae* 61:1 (2001), 5-52.

⁵¹ See, for example, Denise Chao, “The Snake in Chinese Belief,” *Folklore* 90:2 (1979), 193-203; “In the Han Dynasty, the round tiles used to build the eaves of the palace were sculpted with two kinds of designs: that of a blue dragon and that of a serpent and a tortoise together. ... Both blue dragon and serpent together with tortoise were the mascots which *would bring peace and prosperity to the people who believed in them*” (200) (*emphasis added*). Indeed, these architectural emblems were indicative of their perceived efficacy.

⁵² Shin-Yi Hsu, “The Cultural Ecology of the Locust Cult in Traditional China,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59:4 (December 1969), 731-752. “Since the Chinese people could not devise practical means to cope with the plagues, they turned to supernatural solutions. The worship of locusts or locust gods was their response to the prolonged and intense environmental stress. It was believed that by making sacrifices to locust gods or by performing specific rituals, locusts could be destroyed by supernatural power” (738). Though this author’s appraisal sounds rather reductionistic (e.g., “since the Chinese people could not devise practical means to cope with the plagues”), it nonetheless evidences the centrality of efficacious, magical thinking that was used to characterize locusts in their society.

⁵³ Eno’s translation of select Shang-era oracle bone inscriptions includes appeals to various elements of the natural world (including “Cloud Di,” “Cloud,” “Snow,” “the Bird Star,” “the Yellow River,” and “Yue Peak”), all of which were propitiated in hopes that they would reward the supplicants. Robert Eno, “Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions,” *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 41-51. 48-49.

⁵⁴ This fact confirms the position put forward by both Wolf (1974) and Harrell (1974) (as outlined above).

One prevalent example can be seen in the case of the dragons and Dragon Kings, both of whom represent common religio-mythic tropes in Chinese culture.⁵⁵ Qiguang Zhao, in his essay on the centrality of water-based (“hydraulic”) imagery in Chinese philosophy and religion, explores the correspondences between these two classes of supernatural beings in a manner that bears directly on the ontological/functionalistic dichotomy currently being investigated:

For Chinese peasants, those dragons who occupy local rivers hardly possess the abstract implications of mythological dragons. Instead of symbolizing sky, emperorship, or good omen, they are merely local water-gods or Dragon Kings. ... Coexisting with mythological dragons, the Dragon King attracted numerous worshippers for hundreds of years. Almost every Chinese village would have a temple in his honor.⁵⁶

However, Zhao notes a pertinent difference between these two conceptualizations of mythic serpents:

[I]mportantly, the mythological dragon is a celestial supreme being; while the Dragon King is both a constructive rain-god and a destructive flood-devil. That is to say, the mythological dragon shows only positive implications; the Dragon King displays both positive and negative factors. We must bear in mind that the Chinese mythological dragon and the Dragon King are the same in appearance. The way to distinguish them is to find their different meanings through context [(i.e., their purported actions towards their human constituents)].⁵⁷

As such, it must be noted that the mythological dragon (of popular entertainment) differs from the Dragon King (of popular worship) based on the fact that the latter is interpreted by his constituents in a functionalistic manner, on the basis of his purported positive or negative impacts upon the community.⁵⁸ As noted by Chau, the extent to which these impacts were felt was primarily determined by the cogency of various narratives of efficacy (or inefficacy) attached to these deities, as these accounts were largely responsible for determining the willingness of local people to participate in their cults.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See Chau (2006) for an excellent example of a particular Dragon King cult. See also: Qiguang Zhao, "Chinese Mythology in the Context of Hydraulic Society," *Asian Folklore Studies* 48:2 (1989), 231-246.

⁵⁶ Zhao, 237.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 238. This point is also made on page 240, where the author notes that “Chinese peasants take an ambivalent attitude towards the Dragon King, who may be a great helper, a hopeless spoiler, or at times, a lovable clown. *It all depends on how he exercises his power over water*” (emphasis added).

⁵⁸ These impacts are considered in Alvin P. Cohen’s “Coercing the Rain Deities in Ancient China,” which describes the types of ritual invocations and techniques of coercion that would be employed against a recalcitrant dragon king. *History of Religions* 17:3/4, Current Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Religions, (February-May 1978), 244-265.

⁵⁹ Chau, 99-123.

In this way, zoomorphic deities, whose cults were/are popular in their orientation, are an excellent demonstration of the efficacy hypothesis described above. In particular, they represent an accessible source of religious goods (especially when compared to the most austere members of the Daoist pantheon), but they are simultaneously the most dependent upon narratives of perceived efficacy for the continued relevance of their cults.

Summary

As can be seen, the basic economic/functionalistic model of Chinese religiosity introduced above is evidenced both in the “ghosts, gods, and ancestors” typology proposed by Wolf and among the Buddhist, Daoist, and zoomorphic deities that fell outside of its purview. Though some scholars of Chinese religion have investigated the role of spiritual efficacy (*ling*) in the popular understanding of religion,⁶⁰ the amount of attention that it has received is simply not proportional to its centrality in the lived experience of religious adherents. This being said, it would be a mistake to ascribe a simplistic, mercantile mindset to the bulk of Chinese religious expression and sentiment, as accounts of rituals as simple economic transactions⁶¹ are counterbalanced by accounts rife with emotionally- socially-, and spiritually-nuanced practices.⁶² However, rather than indicating a flaw in the above theory, this dichotomy demonstrates both the

⁶⁰ See, for example, Chau (2006) and P. Steven Sangren, History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁶¹ This mercantile understanding of spiritual transactions has a long history in Chinese religiosity, as evidenced by surviving oracular inscriptions from the Shang dynasty. In these sources, the “purpose of the communication was mainly for worldly affairs—to solve various practical problems such as war, harvest, sickness, hunting, or to interpret natural disasters and portentous astronomical events that were thought to have grave consequences human society” (Poo, 28). These Shang dynasty patterns, which could be seen as a matrix of religious observances, narratives of efficacy and this-worldly concerns, became even more complex in later Chinese history when human social hierarchies came to be applied to the celestial pantheon. One of the most notable manifestations of this tendency can be seen in situations where human officials were thought to outrank their immortal counterparts, which gave them the power to promote and demote deities based upon their perceived efficacy in serving their human constituents (as per Shahar and Weller, 5). Extending this economic understanding to its logical conclusion, Arthur Wolf describes an evocative legal case in modern Taiwan between a wronged human community and a *shen*: “A year or so ago ... during a drought, a god was publicly tried by the magistrate for neglect of duty, condemned, left in the hot sun to see how he liked it himself, and finally, after enduring every kind of insult, was broken to pieces” (144). All of these accounts provide an eloquent testimony to the reciprocal economy of popular Chinese religious observance.

⁶² Various examples from the institutional and popular traditions can be offered to demonstrate the broader resonances of Chinese religious practices. Some of these include: the cult of ancestors, which was based on familial connections and respect rather than economic exchange (Wolf (1974)); cultivation practices involving the visualization and nourishment of microcosmic deities, which stress individual effort over divine benevolence (Schipper (1993)), and Buddhist funerary rites, which stress pain, loss and renewal as much as the specifics of “salvation” (Ch’en (1973) and Alan Cole's "Upside down/Right Side up: A Revisionist History of Buddhist Funerals in China," *History of Religions* 35:4. (May 1996), 307-338).

variety of perceived relationships between human beings and extra-human deities, and the various modes of communication considered appropriate for interacting with these beings.⁶³ The multifarious corpus of religious behaviours utilized to commune with these beings will be discussed below, in the chapter on ritual. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to outline the resonances between “secular” (political) power and spiritual efficacy in the traditional Chinese worldview, as these cosmological, mythological and functional parallels are essential to the present project of shedding light on the popular conception of Mao.

Political Power and Spiritual Potency

As detailed above, Chinese religiosity (classical and modern, popular and institutionalized) is often characterized by its focus on the efficacy of various extra-human beings in effecting change in the mortal world. By adopting this focus, the overall system can be seen to encourage a more “porous” worldview than is commonly accepted in the West, as it effectively demolishes the seemingly inviolable boundary between the realms of the secular and sacred (a typically unassailable dogma in the academic study of religion).⁶⁴ Instead of occupying cleanly demarcated categories, the extra-human beings posited by the Chinese cosmology (a multifarious group outlined above) were understood to co-exist with human society in a symbiotic relationship⁶⁵ – whereby services were provided (in the case of the gods) and relationships maintained (in the case of the ancestors) in exchange for worship and sacrifice.⁶⁶ Indeed, this cosmological porosity can be seen as utterly central to the lived experience of

⁶³ In a pleasing linguistic correspondence, both the adjective “appropriate” and the nominal phrase “[ritualistic] modes of communication” would be represented by a single classical Chinese term: *li* (禮).

⁶⁴ This dogmatic attempt to demarcate the realms of the secular and sacred (or, conversely, the sacred and profane), despite the interpenetration of these categories in virtually all societies, can be seen in the sociological writings of Durkheim and the comparative theories of Mircea Eliade (among many others). Given the tremendously influential stature of these two theorists (and their disciples), it is not surprising that these categories are so prevalent in the academic study of religion. See: Eliade (1957), Pals (1996).

⁶⁵ Valerie Hansen notes, “[a]s men needed protection and miracles, deities needed people to acknowledge and reward them. The gods lived, even vied, for human recognition.” *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). 48.

⁶⁶ For example, the central contention of Paper’s *The Spirits are Drunk* is that the vast majority of Chinese religious practices use table fellowship to bridge the gap between the human and extra-human realms. In describing the overall aim of his book, Paper suggests that “a singular, specific core of Chinese ritual can be determined and traced from the Neolithic period to the present. This core, in essence, is a communal meal which is often shared with (sacrificed to) spirits” (26 and *passim*).

Chinese religion, given its exhaustively demonstrated focus upon spiritual potency and reciprocal exchange.

Moreover, the porosity of these boundaries is also definitively demonstrated by the fact that vast majority of Chinese deities were once living human beings, with hagiographies that acknowledge (rather than deny) their human provenance.⁶⁷ This process (as well as its cosmological and praxical consequences) are eloquently summarized by Emily Chao:

Powerful historical figures were thought to possess *ling*, magical power or efficacy, which supplicants could harness for their own needs through acts of ritual propitiation. In other words, ritual formulas allowed for both the local manipulation of deities for personal benefit and the expansion of the supernatural realm through the deification of historical figures.⁶⁸

While this process alone provides some insight into the means by which a human political leader could be elevated to divine status (especially with the advent of narratives demonstrating a level of supernatural efficacy), the next chapter's exploration of the apotheosis of Mao also requires an excursion into the traditional Chinese understanding of political rulership – as this understanding centered on the metaphorical and praxical relationship between king, cosmos and pantheon.

In general, this understanding of leadership can be subdivided into two related spheres, the cosmological and the sociological (defined broadly), both of which functioned as organizing metaphors in the folk psychology of traditional China. In the first case, the traditional worldview described the ruler as both a functional link between the natural world, the divine pantheon and human society, and as a microcosmic analogue of the forces of the cosmos instantiated in human form. The multifarious connections between the human sociopolitical order and the cosmos can also be seen in the fact that many traditional pantheons of gods were thought to possess the same

⁶⁷ For instance, von Glahn notes that a common feature in the cult of many popular gods “was their stature as heroic warriors who met a premature, and usually violent, death. In this respect they resembled vengeful ghosts, who life force, not yet exhausted, remained a palpable presence in the mortal world. ... Though the titles and honors showered upon such figures enhanced their dignity in the eyes of the people, it was not their bureaucratic office but the popular belief in the supernatural powers wielded by heroic victims of violence that made them into gods” (63). Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and The Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). See also: Harrell (1974), *passim*; von Glahn, 74-75, 164-167; Wolf (1974), 140. For a more extensive account of this transformational process, see Terry Kleeman's *A God's Own Tale*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), which translates a medieval Chinese scripture describing the mortal existence and eventual apotheosization of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong.

⁶⁸ Chao (1999), 516.

hierarchical and bureaucratic structure as their human analogues, with the popular pantheon headed by the Jade Emperor – a divine being whose image and characterization were obviously modeled on his human counterpart.⁶⁹ On a sociological level, the position and function of the political leader were thought to be tied to the ruler's embodiment of cultural virtues, which were seen by many as the fountainhead of his charismatic virtue (*de* 德). These cosmological and sociological positions will be summarized below, though their extensive coverage in Sinological scholarship obviates the necessity of presenting a morass of details.

Cosmology and Rulership

From the earliest periods of recorded Chinese history, the ruler was understood to occupy an interstitial position, bridging the gap between humanity and the cosmos (defined broadly enough to encompass the wider world of ancestors, spirits, gods, and natural phenomena (including weather, epidemics, and astral bodies)). So prevalent was this understanding that it permeated all aspects of social and religious thought, from the most popular forms of folk religion to the elite formulations of the imperial cult and court Confucianism. Indeed, the Chinese ruler's interstitial role is evidenced in the very language used to describe his position, including the archaic *wang* (王),⁷⁰ the poetic/scholarly “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi* 天子),⁷¹ and the

⁶⁹ Julian F. Pas and Man Kam Leung, “Jade Emperor” in *The Historical Dictionary of Taoism*, (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 184. Responding to the criticism that the Jade Emperor was invented by Chinese elites to legitimate their own leadership, H. Y. Feng argues that “it is not likely that an emperor who wished to cover up his defeat at the hands of barbarians by some divine ordinance would invent a deity totally unknown to his subjects. Maspero has said that ‘...with false visions even more than genuine ones it is essential to base them upon well-established belief...’ and ‘it is evident that, for the Emperor to have so definite a vision of his ancestor bringing him the order from the god, the god must already have ranked as a supreme deity in popular belief’” (242–244). H. Y. Feng “The Origin of Yu Huang,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1:2 (July 1936), 242–250.

⁷⁰ The superhuman character of the ruler inherent in the term “wang” is addressed in Julia Ching's *Mysticism and Kingship in China*. In particular, she begins the second chapter of her magisterial tome with an overview of the term's historical and philological origins: “The Chinese character *wang* (king, ruler, or prince) is found frequently on ancient oracle bones. The graph is sometimes supposed to represent a fire in the earth, other times an axe, but in any case designates without a doubt the political ruler and his royal ancestors. The French scholar Léon Vandermeersch sees *wang* in relation to *shih / shi* [士] (officer, written with one vertical line going through a longer horizontal line to reach a shorter one), a term originally denoting ‘male,’ and explains it as the *virile* ‘*wang*,’ father of the ethnic group, heir of the founder-ancestor's power. Thus kingship is placed in a familial and patriarchal context” (35). In addition to the connections between an individual ruler and his sacred ancestors (as well as natural phenomena) evidenced in this quotation, one should also attend to the famous etymology of this term offered by Dong Zhongshu (which is explored below).

⁷¹ See, for example, Marcel Granet's *The Religion of the Chinese People*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975): “a divine power could work only through its followers; these reciprocally participated closely in divinity: the king bore the title of *T'ien Tzu*, Son of Heaven. We shall see that to give that title its fullest value, priestly speculation was able to create genealogical myths that connected the royal line to the true son of Heaven. The basic idea was that the King was one whom Heaven treated as a son, that is to say, one to whom it delegated its power” (65). Likewise,

term most frequently translated as “emperor” (*Huangdi* (皇帝)), which von Glahn suggests should most properly be rendered “Resplendent Thearch.”⁷² Moreover, it should be noted that this exalted understanding of the ruler’s position was already established in the centuries before the Common Era, as evidenced in the writings of Dong Zhongshu, a “second-century BCE ‘political theologian,’” who explained the etymology of the term *wang* (王) by putting forward the following hypothesis about its historical origins:

Those who in ancient times invented writing drew three lines and connected them through the middle, calling the word ‘king’. The three lines represent Heaven, earth and the human being, and that which passes through the middle joins the principles of all three.... Thus the king is but the executor of Heaven. He regulates its seasons and brings them to completion.⁷³

Though Dong spoke from within the Confucian tradition, the parallels between his approach and those of earlier periods⁷⁴ evidences the ubiquity of this ritualized, multimodal understanding of political leadership.

As can be seen, the Chinese conception of rulership was intimately correlated with a vision of a profoundly integrated cosmos, to the extent that this system coloured the etymologies and linguistic usages used to describe the holders of political power. Indeed, these terms provide evidence of the fact that the ruler, in some ways, served as a metonym for his nation (and, more broadly, for all of humanity).⁷⁵ This being said, the relationship between imperial power and classical cosmological schemata was not simply metaphorical, as it actually defined many aspects of the Son of Heaven’s ritual and political responsibilities.

Ching notes that this term can be dated (at very latest) to the Zhou dynasty, as it is frequently attested to in the *Shijing* and the *Shujing* (36). See also: Stephen Bokenkamp, “Record of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices” in *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 251-260. 253.

⁷² More specifically, von Glahn notes that “the prosaic English translation as ‘emperor’ obviously fails to capture the implications of theocratic power imbedded in the Chinese word.” 39.

⁷³ *Ch’un-ch’iu fan-lu*, quoted in Ching, 83. Demonstrating its continued prevalence, this etymology is quoted in Rick Harbaugh’s *Chinese Characters: A Genealogy and Dictionary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). 3.

⁷⁴ As discussed at length in Ames (1983) and Ching (1997).

⁷⁵ See, for instance, the *Institutes of the Zhou*, which describe the king’s role as follows: “The king alone constitutes the kingdom. He determines the four corners and fixes the principal position. He plans the capital and the countryside. He creates the ministries and separates their functions, thus offering norms for the people” (quoted in Ching, 48).

This notion of the ruler as a cosmological functionary was central to the imperial cult, much of which was predicated on meteorological rituals intended to ensure the smooth operation of the cosmos. This role is discussed in some detail in Fitzgerald's Short Cultural History of China:

The king, the Son of Heaven, was the instrument by which this balance [between yin and yang, growing weather and harvesting weather] was maintained. His duty was to perform the sacrifices at appropriate times and establish a relationship between Man and Heaven. In his first beginnings the king was far more priest than soldier. His terrestrial duties of government could be delegated to lesser men, his ministers. He alone could perform the magical sacrifices which assured the harmony of the divine powers.... The Son of Heaven alone sacrificed to Heaven and Earth.⁷⁶

The ruler's ritual duties, which could include the microcosmic replication of celestial progressions,⁷⁷ the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices,⁷⁸ and the veneration of imperial ancestors,⁷⁹ all

⁷⁶ C. P. Fitzgerald, China: A Short Cultural History, (London: The Cresset Library, 1986). 40. See also Jeffrey F. Meyer's The Dragons of Tiananmen: Beijing as a Sacred City, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991): "The Chinese capital was first and foremost the home of the emperor, the ruler and pivot of the terrestrial order, as Shangdi (emperor on high) or Tian (heaven) was the ruler of the celestial world. These two orders were not separated, but intimately related, and the point of communication and interaction was the person of the emperor" (35). Stephan Feuchtwang makes a similar assertion concerning the postulated efficacy of imperial ritualism, noting that the ruler's ritual actions (in particular, the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth) were so powerful that, when properly performed, they "could affect the universe as a whole" (29). Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor, (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001).

⁷⁷ See Granet's Religion of the Chinese People for an extensive discussion of the emperor's role in cosmological ritual: "The Son of Heaven could perfectly well carry out the celestial Work of Time without either using regional delegates or circulating through the regions. A suitably constructed building could suffice to make the Sovereign Influence shine upon the whole country" (67). This ritual compound, the Ming Tang ("Hall of Distinction"), was constructed and appointed as a metaphorical map of the cosmos, with various rooms representing the ebb and flow of *qi* throughout the realm. Within this compound, the ruler enacted his ritual obligations: "In order to promulgate the calendar, in the months in the middle of each season, the months of the solstices and equinoxes, the king would stand in the central rooms facing due East, South, West, North, as the two His and the two Ho [functionaries] stood at the four directions. ... Thus the annual cycle would be completed by the royal tour of the square mansion of the Calendar. ... For the year to turn along with the symbolic cross [manifested in the construction of the Ming T'ang], it was necessary and sufficient that the king, by his clothes, his food, and so on, dazzlingly manifest his being in conformity with the system of the universe" (67-68). As an intriguing corollary, Jeffrey Myer provides a convincing case that Beijing as a whole (and the Forbidden City in particular) were constructed on largely symbolic grounds, as they could be seen to represent the macrocosm while simultaneously providing a ritual arena within which the Emperor could fulfill his ritualized cosmological duties (29-120). See also: Ching, 53.

⁷⁸ The *feng* and *shan* sacrifices were succession rituals carried out by dynastic successors to grant themselves legitimacy by formally announcing their rulership to Heaven at the apex of Mount Tai (one of the five Marchmounts of both Daoism and Chinese folk religion). This function is discussed in the Chronicle of the Han (*Han Shu*), which states: "As for Mount Tai, it is the sacred peak Daizong, the place where a true King announces a change of ruling family [to Heaven]." Quoted in Gary Arbuckle's "Inevitable Treason: Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115:4 (October-December 1995), 585-597. 589. As the *Han Shu* suggests, these rituals fulfilled both political and cosmological ends, as they announced "to the world the legitimacy of the rulers, who proclaimed that they had received the Mandate of Heaven, and also brought peace to the world." (Ching, 29). Building upon this conception, Stephen Bokenkamp notes that "the ultimate purpose of the Feng rite, then, was to enact the sealing of a new covenant

depended on viewing the king/emperor as a man whose greatness⁸⁰ resulted from his position as a microcosmic analogue to (and collaborator with) the celestial and extrahuman realms. As in the above cases, the ruler's intermediary role in cosmic/spiritual realm was not dismissed as a poetic contrivance, but instead acted as a metaphorical guidepost for various elements in the social and cultural spheres. One example of this impact can be seen in the classical Chinese approach to the science of astronomy, which assumed that the heavens operated analogously to the functioning of the human political order:

The heavenly geography ... reveals strong concentric and axial imagery. The celestial capital was located in the "center" of the heavens, the area of the polar constellations, and the pole star itself, Polaris, has the name *tianhuang dadi*, "great emperor of the heavens." "The pole star was thus the fundamental basis of Chinese astronomy. It was connected with a background of microcosmic-macrocosmic thinking. The celestial pole corresponded to the position of the emperor on earth, around whom the vast system of the bureaucratic state naturally and spontaneously revolved." The stars and constellations in the area of this central enclosure have names that describe a celestial capital city, with its office buildings, palaces, temples, altars, walls, gates and other sites of importance. There are, for example, star groups that represent the imperial field plowed by the emperor in the spring rite, the site of the spring audience, the apartments of the imperial princes in the eastern part of the palace, the interior palace, the palace of the empress and the royal concubines, the imperial granaries, the altar of the land and grain, the ancestral temple. ...

between the emperor, one of whose titles was 'child of Heaven,' and Heaven, also called the 'Thearch on High.' The Shan rite was meant to actualize a similar covenant with the feminine divinity of Earth. Throughout the covenant, the position of humanity between Heaven and Earth was secured and the mediating status of a specific dynasty assured" (253).

This being said, it should be noted that these rituals were not overly common, as mytho-historical sources only attested to their performance by seven Chinese monarchs (the legendary Shun, Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, Gao Zong and Xuan Zong of the Tang, and Ren Zong of the Song) (Ching, 29).

⁷⁹ In describing the ritual veneration of the imperial ancestors, Henry Blodgett takes particular note of the honours lavished upon the funerary tablets of deceased emperors – honours that they, in fact, shared with the tablets of Heaven. This fact underscores the cosmological importance of political leaders in imperial China: "It is to be observed that in this arrangement the tablets to the deceased Emperors are regarded as P'ei Wei (配位) that is, mated with, equal to, associates of, Shang Ti, or T'ien (Heaven) in honor and worship. Similarly on the Altar to Earth these tablets are regarded as P'ei Wei, mated with, equal to, associates of, Earth in honor and worship. Of course it cannot be intended that the Emperors at death have become equal in magnitude and dynamic forces to Heaven and Earth. The idea would rather be that they are exalted to this honor as being equal in virtue to Heaven and Earth, and as having lived throughout all the functions of their being in entire conformity to that universal law which pervades Heaven and Earth, that is to the law of nature. It may also include the idea that the Emperor is the vicegerent of Heaven and Earth in the sway he exercises, his authority over men." "The Worship of Heaven and Earth by the Emperor of China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20 (1899), 58-69. 62-63. While this description is relatively archaic (at least in terms of contemporary scholarship), it is notable because it was written at a time when the imperial cult was still an active component of Chinese religio-political life, by a Western scholar who experienced these rituals firsthand (Blodgett's experiences are summarized in "China's Real Condition," a *New York Times* article from December 24, 1896. Accessed online at:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9A02E3D91231E033A25755C2A9649D94659ED7CF>.

⁸⁰ For example, this model is described in Zhou Dunyi's *Penetrating the Book of Changes*, which discusses the sage king's role as the "One Man" who acts as the moral and cosmological root of human society (Ching, 114).

In certain accounts of the symbolism of Beijing's Forbidden City, it is suggested that Taiyi, or Shangdi, the supreme emperor, rules from this heavenly enclosure just as the son of heaven rules from the Forbidden City.⁸¹

This understanding of the cosmos also highlights the “concentric” and analogical vision of political power postulated by Chinese religious psychology – notions that are central to the sociological component of the classical understanding of political leadership.

Just as the classical understanding of astronomy cited above indicates certain perceived parallels between the cosmos and political order, so too were many descriptions of celestial pantheons structured upon the model of human political bureaucracies. Within this framework, the Jade Emperor (an extra-human analogue of the human *Huangdi*) was often thought to rule over the gods, ghosts and ancestors, with various functional roles (City God, Stove God, etc.) played by deceased individuals “who have been assigned a rank in the supernatural bureaucracy.”⁸² This symbolic system structured various elements of religious practice, from the iconography in local temples (wherein many gods were depicted in official dress) to the proper modes of address for communicating with these deities (which were often based upon the literary forms used in corresponding with imperial bureaucrats).⁸³ Moreover, just as the king/emperor was thought to have a measure of control over celestial and calendrical events, his power was also thought to extend to the members of this extra-human hierarchy, such that “state officials – most notably the emperor himself – could revoke deities’ titles, demote them, or even physically punish them if they failed to perform their duties.”⁸⁴ In this way, the interstitial status of the ruler in the Chinese religio-cultural framework is once again brought to the fore, this time due to the symbolic affinities between the earthly and celestial bureaucracies and the assumption that imperial authority could be brought to bear against extra-human entities.

⁸¹ Myers, 36. See also: Ching, 48-50; Granet, 69.

⁸² Harrell (1974), 193. See also von Glahn, 53, 62.

⁸³ Teiser, 30-32. See also: Feuchtwang (2001).

⁸⁴ Shahar and Weller, 5.

Rulership, Society and Virtue (德)

In addition to the metaphorical connection between the emperor and the cosmos (including the world of nature and the extrahuman realm), the multimodal understanding of political leadership popular in classical China also differed from its Western counterparts through its emphasis on the tripartite relationship between ruler, moral charisma (*de* 德), and social order. This notion was, fittingly enough (given the previous discussion of imperial metaphors in classical Chinese astronomy), described in the *Analects* using astral imagery: “Governing with excellence (*de* 德) can be compared to being the North Star; the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute.”⁸⁵ Speaking more broadly, it is notable that the vast majority of religio-philosophical traditions in Chinese history adopted some form of this fundamental premise, jointly suggesting that peace and social harmony depended upon the personal virtue of the monarch, from whom it would flow outward to the remainder of society.⁸⁶ While this understanding has been interpreted by some Western scholars in a strictly literal fashion (as a process of teaching by example), historical sources seem to ascribe an affective (even osmotic) power to the sheer force of the ruler’s will. For instance, Graham notes that “in a state which has the Way the ruler wins the reverent submission of all by ceremony alone without the need of force, through the Potency [*de*] which emanates from his person.”⁸⁷ In this way, the personal charisma of the ruler was seen as an efficacious force, transforming the lives of citizens throughout the realm – a fact which implies certain marked similarities to the notion of spiritual potency (*ling*) detailed above.

⁸⁵ *Analects* 2:1. The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation. Translated and with an introduction by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998). In their introduction, Ames and Rosemont suggest that *de* “nearly approximates *dharma* in signifying what we can do and be, if we “realize (*zhi*)” the most from our personal qualities and careers as contextualized members of a specific community” (57). In the example above, the ruler’s excellence inspires reverence concentrically, from all corners of society, which is fitting, given that his “community” is understood to encompass all under Heaven (天下).

⁸⁶ In classical thought, this foundational axiom is most commonly represented through the notion of *wu-wei* (“actionless action”). While this concept is interpreted differently by the various philosophical schools then prevalent, these diverse interpretations are unified through several shared features, including the near-universal application of *wu-wei* to the exigencies of political leadership; a perceived synchronicity between the ruler’s ability to embody *wu-wei* and his personal charisma (*de*); and a conviction that *wu-wei*, as a non-invasive technique of leadership, was preferable to ruling by law. For an extensive discussion of these issues, see Slingerland (2003). From a Confucian perspective, the ruler’s “relationship with [his] subordinates is characterized by a total absence of compulsion. That the particular realization of these subordinates happens to be congruent with that of the ruler is due to their common participation in a creative moral order” (Ames, 29). See also: Ames, 28-64.

⁸⁷ A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China, (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1989), 13.

Though China's last dynasty collapsed almost a century ago, the body of metaphors and images relating to imperial leadership remain a salient source of tropes and symbols up to the present. The resilience of such symbolism is, to some extent, unsurprising, especially given the continued presence of imperialistic imagery within Chinese culture (e.g., the bureaucratic organization of the celestial pantheon and the enduring popularity of fiction set in the imperial period). One example of a (relatively) modern, metaphorical use of this image can be found in Madsen's Morality and Power in a Chinese Village, which sees some of the author's respondents using the term to describe charismatic holders of local political power:

When people called Longyong or Qingfa 'local emperor,' they were not referring to the benevolent majesty sometimes associated with emperorhood but rather to its fearsome power. Both Longyong and Qingfa were exceedingly powerful men by virtue of their physical prowess, personal drive, social status, and political position. Their power was fearsome, not because it was malevolent, but because it was raw, explosive, sometimes unchecked, and always very close at hand.⁸⁸

A more compelling account of the continued salience of this imagery can be seen in Ann Anagnost's "The Beginning and End of an Emperor," which details the exploits of a Chinese peasant who successfully managed to convince a number of his fellow citizens that he had been granted the Mandate of Heaven and that he would soon be inaugurating a new dynasty.⁸⁹ This would not be that notable, given the similarity with the founding of numerous Chinese dynasties, save that it occurred in the early 1980s in the People's Republic of China! His tale, one account of which is related in the *Chinese Peasant Gazette* (*Zhongguo nongmin bao*), contains numerous classical patterns, including claims that the prospective emperor would possess magical powers,⁹⁰ that his ascendancy would be marked by natural calamities (including storms and earthquakes),⁹¹ that he was identifiable by various physiognomic signs,⁹² that he would be a

⁸⁸ Richard Madsen, Morality and Power in a Chinese Village, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). 33. Note the continued use of emperor as a symbol (with the concomitant understanding of *de*) within the apparently socialist village, given that this imagery was being used either in the context of the Cultural Revolution (or at least by individuals recollecting about that time period). This type of imagery was (and is) also extensively utilized in descriptions of Mao (as will be seen in the following chapter).

⁸⁹ Ann Anagnost, "The Beginning and End of an Emperor: A Counterrepresentation of the State," *Modern China* 11:2 (April 1985), 147-176.

⁹⁰ Anagnost (1985), 152.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 154.

scholar (capable of drawing knowledge from ancient texts),⁹³ and that individuals were to demonstrate devotion to him via their adherence to Confucian virtues.⁹⁴ In noting the appeal of these images (and the man who presented them), Anagnost presents an account that eloquently includes all of the themes introduced in this chapter (including mystical potency, narratives of efficacy and cultural continuity):

Through his manipulating of the symbols of knowledge and power, Li became the personification of the emperor-hero. He presumed to be not only the channel of communication between heaven and earth, but also a conduit for those highly significant goods by which peasants in China measure their participation in the new society. ... Li promised the establishment of a new moral order from which evil would be extirpated and in which his followers could take significant roles. This promise was already half-fulfilled as he began to recruit and train a loyal band of future officials. ... The emperor was the one from whom all blessing were to flow ... eventually. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Li Laiyong was not only going to be the future emperor of China, he was going to be *their* emperor. Li was, in large part, a folk creation in which his followers actively participated. In the gifts that followed from them to him, they staked their claim on him.⁹⁵

In this way, the tale of Li Laiyong (and his abortive attempt to found a new state) provides evidence of the continued salience of traditional understandings of political power, spiritual potency, and the multiple intersections between these realms.

Conclusions

As can be seen, the cosmological / metaphysical system posited by Chinese religion and philosophy allows for notable resonances between realms that, for a Western reader, may initially seem utterly disparate. Not only were the lines of demarcation between the human and extra-human realms relatively porous (allowing various types of interaction between gods and their human constituents), but so too was the mystical potency ascribed to a political leader similar to the spiritual efficacy of a powerful deity. In fact, it is arguable that the human faculty of *de*, when possessed by a king or emperor, was functionally identical to the spiritual faculty of *ling* – especially in terms of its effects upon the populace.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 165-166.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165-167.

Now that the porosity of the traditional Chinese worldview has been established, it remains to utilize these conclusions in exploring the modern religious understandings of Mao – a topic that provides the subject matter for the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Many Faces of Mao

After delving into the cosmological and metaphysical underpinnings of Chinese folk psychology, with specific reference to the culture's pragmatic, efficacy-driven approach to political leaders and extrahuman beings, we are now prepared to tackle the more complicated issue of the public's characterization of the Great Helmsman. While Mao seemed to wholeheartedly adopt the May 4th critique of Chinese culture (which he most succinctly summarized in the Cultural Revolution rhetoric of "Smashing the Four Olds"),¹ it seems an undeniable irony that many of the tropes used to characterize him were (and are) drawn, not from the theories of Marx, Lenin or Trotsky, but from the popular images of deities and emperors. In this chapter, we will outline these multifarious (yet strangely compatible) understandings, exploring their interrelationships and considering the manner in which such characterizations were both meaningful and appropriate.

While this overview will draw upon various sources (including ethnographies, newspaper articles, personal conversations, and academic disquisitions) in exploring these issues, it makes particular use of Geremie Barmé's indispensable Shades of Mao – a diligently translated² sourcebook of modern Chinese perspectives on the Chairman Mao revival. Though it was released in the mid-90s, meaning that further research was obviously required (in order to confirm that the phenomena discussed therein continue to be relevant), it still provided a jumping-off point for my own reflections, as well as a comprehensive overview of the disparate (even polarized) approaches to Mao in Chinese popular culture. Despite its evident utility, it is

¹ Though a considerable body of Mao's writings expostulate upon this apparent commitment to abandoning "feudal Chinese culture," his actual relationship with tradition (in terms of his style of governance, his descriptions of himself, and his use of classical literary and philosophical techniques) is considerably less clear. This being said, an analysis of these issues, which would depend upon a detailed exegesis of Mao's considerable literary corpus (not to mention a mountain of historical evidence), is beyond the scope of this paper (as discussed in the introduction), though they would certainly provide fruitful terrain for future exploration.

² Though I would not consider myself to be sufficiently linguistically proficient to make this assessment, Lucian Pye and Susan Shuyu Kong's reviews both comment upon Barmé's ability to capture the nuances of the original texts while simultaneously providing readers with considerable insight into the context(s) within which these views were formulated. Indeed, Pye goes so far as to laud Barmé as "the foremost foreign expositor and critic of contemporary Chinese popular culture" (461). Lucian W. Pye, Review of Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader by Geremie R. Barmé, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56:2 (May 1997), 461-463. Susan Shuyu Kong, Review of Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader by Geremie R. Barmé, *Pacific Affairs* 71:3 (Autumn 1998), 410-411.

however necessary to acknowledge a difference between my own approach and that taken by Barmé, as our overall emphases differ. In particular, his article (which functions as an introduction to the materials presented in the book itself) concentrates upon the various functional contexts within which Mao was being posthumously evaluated. In it, he suggests that Mao has been “commercialized” (through memoirs, audio cassettes, and cultural tourism), “lampooned” (through literature and visual art) and “sanctified” (through the development of various Mao cults).³ While I acknowledge the validity of these categories, my own analysis seeks a more panoptic perspective, based largely upon the contention that the cultural constructs referred to by Chinese writers (whether utilized in an adulatory, recriminatory or caricaturizing manner) are significant in and of themselves. It is hoped that this approach will allow me to examine the role of Mao in the modern Chinese “cultural toolkit.” Indeed, when multiple authors, each striving for different ends, employ similar understandings of a cultural object, it would certainly seem to imply some form of cultural consensus (one that transcends rhetorical appropriations), as the symbols, metaphors and analogies utilized therein would obviously need to be shared to be mutually intelligible.⁴

Mao as God

While the posthumous worship of Mao described in the introduction (and covered in more detail below) does indeed seem rather ironic (especially when considered in light of the PRC government’s ostensible commitment to Marxist atheism),⁵ it is certainly not without precedent. More specifically, it can be seen as a natural outgrowth of the public adulation directed at Mao during his lifetime and as a continuation of preexisting cultural patterns concerning the relationship between efficacy, social function, and the cosmological/theological visions of Chinese folk religion. In sketching out the “god-like” popular characterization of the

³ Barmé (1995), 49.

⁴ This understanding follows from Bruner’s principle of “hermeneutic composability,” which details the manner in which these various construals of Mao could be assembled from a shared body of cultural materials.

⁵ This perspective can be noted in Jiping Zuo’s “Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China,” *Sociological Analysis* 52:1 (Spring 1991), 99-110: “the elimination of traditional religion did not lead China to atheism. On the contrary, a new religion was created. In the eyes of the masses, there still existed a ‘supernatural’ power (Yinger, 1970). The ‘manna’ proceeding from Mao prevented a man from believing himself to be the master of his own fate or that social progress could be achieved solely by human effort, as Marxism claims” (103). While I agree with the general thrust of Zuo’s argument, I think it understates the extent to which such beliefs empowered (certain segments of) the Chinese population. The culturally creative application of these beliefs (and the impact that they had upon the lives of Chinese citizens) will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter and in the conclusion of this study.

Great Helmsman, we will first attend to the popular veneration of the living Mao, a phenomenon that began soon after his rise to power during the Long March and achieved a feverish intensity during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. This background information, which will also be called upon during the discussion of Mao-era rituals in chapter four, will also be useful in approaching the worship practices directed at the deceased Chairman.

Venerating the Living Mao

During Mao's lifetime, his considerable personal charisma, coupled with his seemingly miraculous achievements as a military and political leader, assured him a place of honour in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. Nowhere was this truer than among the peasantry – a stereotypically disenfranchised segment of the population that was lauded as the cornerstone of Chinese society in Maoist rhetoric.⁶ Though some of the adulation directed at Mao was expressed in the newly imported language of Marxism/Maoism, much more of it was shaped by traditional metaphors and conceptual schemata. One of the most prevalent of these metaphors was the characterization of Mao as an extrahuman being, with the attendant ability to efficaciously transform the mortal world through the power of his will.

Though many foreign scholars have acknowledged the “pseudo-religious” character of Mao worship during this stage of Chinese history, they are often less prepared to note its parallels with traditional religious practices. One of the most overt of these parallels is described in Xing Lu's Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution – a text that provides an emic account of the Cultural Revolution (from the perspective of an expatriate survivor). In it, she outlines the (then common) practice of rededicating ancestor shrines to the worship of Mao:

Traditional Chinese altars used for ancestor worship were converted into altars of loyalty to Mao. As observed by Hsia (1972), “Many Chinese villagers dedicated ‘rooms of loyalty’ to Chairman Mao and many peasant households have their own ‘tablets of loyalty.’ These are clearly derived from the ancestral temples and tablets of old China;

⁶ Indeed, one of the characteristic features of Maoism is the valorization of peasants by stressing their “class purity” and their political clout (as described in Hsiung, 119-121). As Mao suggests in a 1927 report, the success of a (then prospective) revolution would depend upon “a revolutionary tidal wave in the countryside in order to mobilize tens of thousands of peasants and weld them into this great force” (quoted in Hsiung, 60). This being said, it should be noted that this inversion of traditional power relationships was not a Maoist innovation. Indeed, Chinese philosophers as early as Mencius have argued that rulers were only legitimate to the extent that they placed their citizens before themselves (as in *Mencius* 1B8).

mornings and evenings the villagers gather, either in their communal room, or in front of their family tablets, to pay homage to Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong]" (233).⁷

The rituals carried out at these altars (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) were intended to re-orient the lives of individuals with regards to a postulated extrahuman presence, thus allowing them access to its spiritual potency.⁸ Describing this process of apotheosization in more general terms, Xin Yuan suggests that, during the Cultural Revolution, the Chairman became "the supreme and all-powerful super god, the 'Sun that never sets.'"⁹ In this context, "Mao was invested with a type of power equal, if not superior, to all other religious systems, expressed in such beliefs that he was the Sun, 'sustainer of all things,' a being who turned the universe red."¹⁰ The fact that Mao was, in this case, still a living human being was a secondary concern at best.

Mao's alleged spiritual potency, which was certainly related to his personal charisma, was described by numerous commentators in terms that smack of Frazerian "sympathetic magic."¹¹ In particular, many Red Guards who met with him during his historic audiences in Tiananmen Square (1966-1967) became fanatical in their desire to directly experience the

⁷ Lu, 134. The magical efficacy of Mao's portrait is also attested to in state-produced propaganda from the period, as described in Urban, 144-150. One of the most notable of these accounts describes Mao's image as a cure for blindness: "While treating members of a production brigade on a snow-capped mountain one day, they found a totally blind Lisu woman holding a portrait of our great leader Chairman Mao and wishing him long, long life. This old woman had been a landlord's slave before liberation, and her family had been slaves for generations. Under the wise leadership of Chairman Mao, she had been emancipated after 1949 like the other people of China's minority nationalities. Much as she wanted to see what the great leader Chairman Mao looked like, she was unable to do so because cataracts had caused total blindness. The woman's profound proletarian feelings moved the members of the team and gave them a profound education. Although none had any experience in removing a cataract, they decided to operate so that she could see what Chairman Mao looked like. Before the operation they criticized their own selfish ideas in hesitating to take responsibility upon themselves. The operation was a success [!]" (149). This talismanic usage of Mao's image will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

⁸ These practices present marked similarities to several ancestor veneration rituals advocated in both imperial edicts and Zhuxi's *Family Rituals* – a correspondence that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

⁹ Xin Yuan, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 196-197. Similarly, Li Jie also discusses the Cultural Revolution as a spiritual phenomenon (*Shades of Mao*, 144).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ James G. Frazer, "Sympathetic Magic: The Principles of Magic," *The Golden Bough* (III.1): "If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. ... [F]rom the second [principle,] he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not." Accessed online at *Project Gutenberg*: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/bough11h.htm>

Chairman's mystical power, as described by Liang Heng (a student who was present at one of these rallies):

Those [hands] Chairman Mao had touched now became the focus of our fervor. Everyone surged toward them with outstretched arms in hopes of transferring the sacred touch to their own hands. If you couldn't get close enough for that, then shaking the hand of someone who had shaken hands with our Great Saving Star would have to do. So it went, down the line, until sometimes handshakes were removed as many as one hundred times from the original one, spreading outward in a vast circle like waves in a lake when a meteor crashes into its center.¹²

Conversely, just as Mao was (in some respects) conflated with the traditional views of godhood, so too were his opponents demonized using the language of popular religion. For instance, class enemies were described in both formal and informal contexts as “monsters,” “cow ghosts and snake spirits”¹³ – baleful forces that were outside the purview of human society and moral codes. This denigratory discourse, as encapsulated in the revolutionary requirement to sweep away “all the monsters and demons,” “called for radical actions and left no room for sympathy or compassion for the accused.”¹⁴ The seemingly inevitable result of this process of dehumanization are harrowingly expressed by Xing Lu:

In the field the children of the prisoners followed the example of the Rebels and began beating their own fathers. One of them, a fourteen-year-old boy, carried a metal rod in his hand. He ordered the prisoners to stretch out their hands. One by one he slapped their palms with the rod while accusing them of being bourgeois because their hands were so smooth. The boy's father received his beating in turn. When I asked the boy later how he could strike his own father, he replied that he was only beating ‘cow ghosts and snake spirits.’”¹⁵

¹² Heng and Shapiro (1983), quoted in Lu, 137. See also Urban, 138-140, which draws various examples of this public adulation from the *New China News Agency*, *Peking Radio*, and *Kiangsu Provincial Radio* broadcasts (ca. 1966-1969).

¹³ Lu, 15. The psychology of this process of demonization is eloquently described in Robert Lifton's Revolutionary Immortality: “Maoists later called forth the picturesque idiom of Chinese folklore to place [their] critiques in the center of a demonology – referring to them as ‘demons,’ ‘devils,’ ‘monsters,’ ‘ogres,’ ‘ghosts,’ and ‘freaks.’ But demonology always addresses itself to the management of life and death, and includes an implicit theory of what might be called negative immortality: incarnations of evil which never die out, whatever one does to counter their nefarious influences. Groups like the Maoists who so boldly defy human limitation are inevitably plagued in turn by images of supernatural enemies” (25). Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, (New York: Random House, 1968).

¹⁴ Lu, 61.

¹⁵ Wen (1995), quoted in Lu, 60.

The power attributed to Mao's thought is forcefully demonstrated by the extent to which his ideological categories could trump millennia worth of teachings concerning filial piety and social propriety.

In general, Mao's exemplary character and personal charisma were so highly esteemed (especially by the time of the Cultural Revolution) that they became a sort of "totalizing discourse,"¹⁶ capable of imparting a high unquestionable aura of sanctity to any ideals, individuals or images that were associated with him:

The deification of Mao as savior of the Chinese people and a living god through speeches, songs, and rituals promoted blind faith in Mao's teachings that was applied to every aspect of Chinese life. His image was worshiped as that of an emperor, except with an even greater fervor and fanaticism. His Little Red Book became the bible of the entire nation. Ji Li Jiang (1997) says it well: "To us Chairman Mao was God. He controlled everything we read, everything we heard, and everything we learned in school. We believed everything he said. Naturally, we know only good things about Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Anything bad had to be the fault of others. Chairman Mao was blameless" (265).¹⁷

As seen in some of the previous examples, this discourse conflated Mao's exemplary (and spiritually potent) character with the purported miraculous efficacy of his teachings:

The work team was going to make Mao into a sacred symbol of all the deep hopes and aspirations potentially uniting the villagers into a moral community. This sacred symbol could link the villagers' hopes and aspirations to those of the great public community that was the Chinese nation.... The problem was that there were two inseparable parts to the Mao cult: a veneration of the person that Mao was and of his teachings. They were inseparable because Mao was presented as a great person precisely because of his great teachings; he was almost godlike because his teachings were the Truth itself.¹⁸

While the process whereby Mao's philosophical writings came to possess this talismanic efficacy will be considered in greater detail in the following chapter, at present it is sufficient to note that

¹⁶ The tendency of societies to embrace this type of "totalizing discourse" during periods of instability is discussed at length in Swidler (1986) and Jensen (2007).

¹⁷ Lu, 193.

¹⁸ Madsen, 130. See also: Richard Baum, "Ideology Redivivus," *Problems of Communism* 16:3 (1967), 1-11. It should be noted that this characterization of Mao's teachings was far from simply being a popular construct. In fact, the Chinese government's propaganda department actively encouraged this form of magical thinking. See, for example, the story of Zhao Ziching, reported in an Inner Mongolian radio broadcast (1969): "Poor herdsman Chao Tzu-ching eventually survived following a successful operation on his brain which was injured during an accident at this work site. Who enabled him to bring back his life from threatening death? It was our great leader Chairman Mao, the red sun in our hearts, the invincible thought of Mao Tse-tung, and Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. These brought him back to life again and gave those who fought for his life the inexhaustible strength and infinite wisdom needed to make such a miracle" (quoted in Urban, 157).

“at the peak of a [Cultural Revolution-era] campaign, Mao Tse-tung’s [Mao Zedong’s] Thought served not merely as a guide for action but as a source of quasi-religious inspiration,”¹⁹ such that “his theory was considered ‘invincible’, ‘infallible’ and of ‘boundless radiance’ in its potential to transform every aspect of life.”²⁰ Further, I would argue that this conflation of Mao and his (miraculously effective) Thought was instrumental to his posthumous deification, as will be discussed presently.

Mao Shen (毛神)

Given the establishment of the living Mao as a (quasi-superhuman) being of miraculous spiritual potency, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Chairman’s death (and posthumous political reevaluation) did little to quell the public perception of his magical efficacy, at least among the peasants who represented his core constituency.²¹ As a result, it is entirely understandable that the theme of his continued posthumous efficacy is attested to in writings of all styles (i.e. political, devotional, social scientific) and from all stances (laudatory to recriminatory).

In outlining these views, the most unambiguous claims concerning Mao’s posthumous efficacy are certainly those that explicitly refer to his continued activity in the world. One of the most dramatic of these can be noted in the fact that, nearly twenty years after the Great Helmsman’s death, taxi drivers throughout the country began hanging Mao portraits in their vehicles.²² Ostensibly, they were motivated to do so in the aftermath of a widely discussed traffic accident in the south where a taxi driver claimed he avoided injury due to a Mao poster in his vehicle (the “portrait of Chairman Mao ... is what protected him”).²³ Other drivers explained their talismans with the suggestion that “they hung the Chairman because he could ward off

¹⁹ Lu, 65.

²⁰ Lu, 41-42.

²¹ This discussion of Mao’s posthumous efficacy does not contradict the hermeneutic of generosity proposed in the introduction (in spite of the fact that it seems to be built upon the conflation of Mao’s personal power with the power of his thought) due to the fact that these beliefs did, in fact, have notable social effects. These effects will be considered in more detail throughout the remainder of this chapter, as well as in chapters four and five.

²² This phenomenon is detailed in a New York Times articles from 1991, which describes the presence of these amulets in taxis in Beijing, Guang Zhou and Hebei. Nicholas D. Kristof, “China’s Newest God: The Godless Mao,” *The New York Times* (Jun 2, 1992), A1/A8. See also: Chao (1999), 519.

²³ Hou Dangshang, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 212. See also Kristof: “‘I heard there was a convoy of 15 cars, and every one got in a bad accident except the two that had Chairman Mao’s picture,’ said a 29-year-old taxi driver in Beijing. ‘And in some places, like Shandong province, I hear that for traffic safety reasons they don’t even let you on the road unless you’ve got your Chairman Mao photo out’” (A1).

evil.”²⁴ As Michael Dutton notes, the deification of Mao was largely based upon a growing body of popular narratives concerning the deceased Chairman’s miraculous powers (*ling*):

It probably all began after a multicar pile-up on a Guangdong highway in 1989. Fatal for many, the only person to walk away unscathed from this horrific crash was the driver of the car with a Mao talisman. As word of this story spread, the image of the mystical Mao, who had powers to protect those who possessed a representation of him, was born. Transformed from revolutionary leader into god of good fortune, Mao became a soothsayer for troubled times. From then on, other “miracles” confirmed his beatification. His shadowy apparition appeared on the surface of a pebble drawn from the waters of the Yangtze River; it appeared as a ghostly apparition on the surface of a peasant’s wall where his portrait had once hung; and it even surfaced as nature’s own handiwork, etched onto the rock face of a mountainside on Hainan Island, which became known as Mao Mountain (Maogongshan).²⁵

Though Dutton provides one account of this “initial manifestation” of Mao’s posthumous efficacy in Guangdong, others situate it in the chaos of the Tiananmen Square incident:

During the Tiananmen student movement in 1989, three protesters expressed their distaste for [Mao] by throwing paint at his enormous portrait overlooking Tiananmen Square. Just hours after the portrait had been defaced, the heavens opened up with a drenching rain. That storm, believers say, was the first clear indication of Mao’s divinity.²⁶

Regardless of the exact tales being told, narratives of efficacy were certainly central to the popular reconceptualization of Mao in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In an excursion to China in the summer of 2005 (more than fifteen years after the events described by Dutton), I observed the continued presence of such medallions in taxicabs in Beijing, Qufu and Shenyang – some of which were nigh indistinguishable from traditional good luck charms (which typically bear images of Guanyin or other popular deities). Using language similar to the individuals quoted by Barmé and Cohen, a cab driver in Qufu suggested that this amulet “provided good fortune and protected the vehicle.” When pressed to speculate about whether he thought Mao would object to these mystical objects, our guide replied that “when

²⁴ Liu Xiaoqing, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 176. This tendency is also described in Cohen (1993), in Lu (2004), 147, and in Michael Dutton, “From Culture Industry to Mao Industry: A Greek Tragedy,” *boundary 2* 32:2 (2005), 152-167.

²⁵ Dutton, 157.

²⁶ Kristof, A8.

Mao was alive, he saw himself as a saint... he had much respect for himself... [thus,] he probably wouldn't mind."²⁷

The taxi amulet phenomena can be seen as microcosm of Mao's posthumous deification, with his perceived spiritual potency combining with narratives of efficacy to create a popular movement possessing many of the characteristics and foci of traditional cults. These tales of Mao's posthumous efficacy can be seen as instances of both narrative accrual (as per Bruner) and of cultural congruence (as per Hsiung). In the first case, they represent the gradual evolution of the Mao-based canon in light of new narratives (in this case, narratives that argue for Mao's continued efficacy in worldly matters), each of which expand the available canonical vocabulary for future "story-tellers". In the second case, they can also be seen as an instance of unification between classical patterns (such as the notions of efficacy described in chapter two) and modern realities (such as the Mao veneration described above).

While the narratives of efficacy described previously are obviously the most dramatic evidence for the religious (re)interpretation of Mao, far more common were sources that described Mao's *words* as miraculously active constituents of modern Chinese society. For example, when *Zhongliu* (a Chinese periodical) advertised a poetry contest whose topic was Mao, they (perhaps unsurprisingly) received a plethora of highly reverential offerings, many of which made specific mention of Mao's mystically potent teachings. One amateur poet claimed that "now [, after Mao's death,] his vast and deep Thought // has become the energy source for all of China."²⁸ Another opined that "His Thought is not only a weapon for revolution // for it holds out hope for the advancement of mankind."²⁹ More officially, a 1993 editorial in the *People's Daily* stated that "Mao thought is a source of endless ideological strength.... [and that] the basic principles of Mao Thought still shine brilliant rays of light."³⁰ In stark contrast to the tone (though not the underlying metaphysical assumptions) of these plaudits, *Shades of Mao* also

²⁷ Personal communication (June 8, 2005). Our guide concluded his analysis by noting that "this [usage of Mao talismans] is the thinking of common people... it is Chinese culture." Similarly, in an interview with Ms. Ouyang (the personal assistant to Professor Mou Dai) in Shenyang, I was informed that most "Chinese people, during the Cultural Revolution, saw Mao as a *shen*" and that this explained the prevalence of the taxi amulets. Personal communication (June 23, 2005).

²⁸ Da Wei, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 191.

²⁹ Zhao Aimin, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 255.

³⁰ *People's Daily*, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 257.

features a verse by an embittered revolutionary poet who bemoans the fact that Mao's shade continues to "prowl the land," exerting a dire effect on all Chinese people, as he "dictates every action, [and] controls every thought."³¹ In all cases, the unstated major premise of these statements is that, for better or worse, Mao's teachings remain potent loci of power. This being said, the above assumption becomes more explicable when considered in light of the performative/ritualistic emphasis on Mao Thought during the Cultural Revolution (an issue that will be treated at length in chapter 4),³² as it is reasonable to assume that such a sweeping praxical development would continue to affect China's cultural vocabulary for years to come.

In addition to the assumptions of posthumous efficacy described above, some sources cited by Barmé explicitly describe Mao as a god. For instance, his efficacy in protecting the vehicles of professional drivers has caused some to argue that "the Chairman's like a guardian God."³³ Contrarily, but using similar concepts, Sun's revolutionary dirge laments the fact that the now-deceased Mao had simply superceded the existing deities: "Had we overthrown the Three Great Mountains only to build a new Temple? // Had we toppled Wealth and Mercy only to build a new shrine?"³⁴ Uniting the ideas of Mao as divinity and Mao's words as continually efficacious, Sun Ya and Jia Lusheng argue that Mao has been "transmogrified into a spiritual force, a belief and ideal.... If you have faith in Mao Zedong, then He will live in your heart forever."³⁵

Another popular means of idealizing the deceased Chairman is through the tendency to draw metaphorical parallels between him and the broader world of nature – a tendency that can

³¹ Sun Jingxuan, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 122. The term "specter" is also, in itself, significant, given the fairly narrow continuum between ghosts and gods in Chinese folk religion (as discussed at length in chapter 2).

³² For example, "one Party Secretary in a Shanxi commune issued the peasants with copies of the Three Standard Articles with the words: 'We don't need to rely on heaven and earth, all we need are these precious Red Booklets and we can dig through the mountains to irrigate our land'" (Xin Yuan, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 198). In a more modern context, a post-Cultural Revolution novelist (Li Jian) describes a Red Guard's mental processes as she unhesitatingly *performs* Mao's teachings in a decidedly unorthodox context (*Shades of Mao*, 223).

³³ Hou Dangsheng, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 213. Likewise, one of Cohen's interviewees states that "Mao Zedong has become like a deity (*shen*)" (Cohen 1993, 129).

³⁴ Sun Jingxuan, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 126. Sun also describes Mao as a specter (a metaphor that is also used by Liu Xiaobo (276-281). Given the Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" between ghosts and gods in this system (see Wolf and Harrell (1974)), such a description cannot be simply written off as an instance of poetic language. Indeed, I would argue that describing Mao as a spirit still presupposes the same cultural approach to the supernatural and that such statements emerge from the same continuum as those discussed above.

³⁵ Sun and Jia, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 168.

also be seen in the depictions of both gods and emperors in the traditional folk pantheon. The most frequent of these is, of course, the description of Mao as the sun:³⁶ symbolic language that becomes additionally poignant with the leader's death. In a more extravagant manner, Mao is also described as a dynamo, powered by the plentiful energies of the natural world: "The raging torrents of the Yellow River and the Yangtze coursed through his veins. His massive chest rose like a great mountain.... He was the enactor of his own will; it was like lightning or a tempest, both majestic and terrifying."³⁷ Further, in a rhetorical move that would either delight or terrify Mircea Eliade, Mao is equated with a Great Tree: an "oak that grew in the soil by the Xiang River, imbued with the strength of its waters and its indomitable spirit."³⁸ While these statements on their own would simply seem anomalous (or perhaps ridiculously fawning), they are given a context by the religious belief/practice that has been seen (in some contexts) to surround depictions of Mao.

The logical terminus of such beliefs, as alluded to in this study's introduction, is that Mao has, in fact, become a deity revered in the folk religious tradition, such that for many "he has become the idol to which the revived worship of the God of Wealth, Guan Gong, Guanyin Bodhisattva, and other gods is married."³⁹ To that end, temples dedicated to the deceased Chairman have sprung up throughout the country⁴⁰ in locations as diverse as Gushui (Shaanxi

³⁶ See, for examples, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 166, 193, 197, 254, and *passim*. More specifically, You Zhi states that Mao's voice, body and name are as lustrous as the sun and the moon (228).

³⁷ Su and Jia, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 165. This metonymical identification between leader and country will be discussed in more detail in the section on "Mao as Emperor."

³⁸ Hai Xingxing, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 253. Wolf's article provides an excellent description of the bureaucratic and political resonances within the Chinese understanding of the supernatural realm.

³⁹ Xin Yuan, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 199. In the same vein, Cohen (1993) reports that "some rural families burn incense and make offerings to small clay statues of Mao on their family altars" (130) and Lu suggests that "[s]ince the end of the Cultural Revolution the cult of Mao has continued unabated in some quarters or has been resurrected after a period of decline in others. Some continue to worship Mao at their family altars, praying to him for peace and safety. According to Xiao Di (1993), peasants in a rural area still erected a temple to Chairman Mao, and thousands of people visit the temple every day burning incense and kowtowing to images of Mao, even years after the Cultural Revolution had ended" (177).

⁴⁰ This phenomenon is noted in Stephan Feuchtwang's "Religion as Resistance," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 161-177: "Mao ... figures as the most dynamic element of a pantheon of religiopolitical figures. In northern Shaanxi, for example, temples honor the Three Sagegods (*San Sheng*): Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De. Another temple to the three Chinese Communist leaders was built in Hunan province and attended by thousands a day until it was closed down in May 1995 because it encouraged superstition. The Reform state encourages a continuing cult of Mao by days of commemoration and veneration at his birthplace and in his mausoleum. Pilgrimage tourism in contemporary China features the birth and death places of Mao, Zhou, Zhu and Deng Xiaoping along with Confucius and the Yellow emperor, founder of the Chinese nation" (165).

province),⁴¹ Shaoshan (Hunan province),⁴² Fujian,⁴³ Guangdong⁴⁴ and Yenan.⁴⁵ While some of these sites downplay their similarities with overtly religious shrines (such as the complex in Gushui, where pilgrims “are not allowed to burn incense before the statue,” because that would be “too much like religion”),⁴⁶ others are quite forthcoming in their characterizations of Mao as a deity, “depicting him as a halo-crowned Buddhist saint or a Chinese folk god bestowing wealth.”⁴⁷ As in traditional popular religion, these beliefs generally center upon the prospective extrahuman being’s ability to provide this-worldly religious goods (including prosperity, progeny, and longevity)⁴⁸ and are reinforced through public narratives of efficacy.⁴⁹ Somewhat ironically, this reappraisal of the Great Helmsman has even been observed in the shamanic

⁴¹ Macartney (2006); George Wehrfritz, “Mao was the best emperor of all time,” *Newsweek* 127:19 (5/06/96), 44.

⁴² Jonathan Watts, “Mao returns to haunt and comfort his people,” *The Guardian* (Saturday December 27, 2003), accessed online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/dec/27/china.jonathanwatts>; Li Li, “Thirty years after his death, Mao’s legacy is most obvious at his birthplace,” *Beijing Review* (October 5, 2006), 21-23; “Don’t Kowtow to Mao,” *Asiaweek* (October 12, 2001), 14; “China: Rooting Out Mao Worship,” *New York Times* (September 27, 2001), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E5D7113AF934A1575AC0A9679C8B63&sec=&spon=&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink>.

⁴³ Jacob Heilbrunn, “Mao more than Ever,” *The New Republic* (April 21, 1997), 20-24.

⁴⁴ Heilbrunn (1997).

⁴⁵ Macartney (2006).

⁴⁶ In spite of this proviso, some visitors apparently rail against the prohibition of traditional worship: “Many who come are disappointed at the restrictions. They offer gaudy plastic flowers and packets of the cigarettes that Mao chain-smoked. One cigarette is tucked between his pink-painted plaster fingers” (Macartney (2006)). See also: Chau, 51.

⁴⁷ “Rooting Out Mao Worship,” (2001); “Don’t Kowtow to Mao” (2001). These sources are compatible with my own observation of various Mao trinkets obviously patterned on traditional apotropaic talismans. On a related note, some of these believers also contextualize Mao within traditional religious pantheons, as noted in Li’s article: “Song [a native of Hebei] said that back in his home province he is among the spiritual believers in Mao, who think that Mao saved the people from suppression and exploitation in his human life and came back to earth to save people. The believers regard Mao as a Buddha” (21).

⁴⁸ For example, Watts suggests that “for many [Mao] remains a figure with supernatural powers. In remote areas, childless couples are said to pray to him for children” (2003). Similarly, Heilbrunn notes that “[i]n the countryside, new and massive temples have been built to Mao in the Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and another temple is under construction in the northern Shaanxi province of Gushuicun. The temples are frequented by party officials and peasants who believe Mao can do everything from cure illnesses to guarantee a good crop” (21-22). In a shockingly millennial interpretation of this Mao cult, a group of Sichuanese factory workers actually committed suicide in order to rejoin their beloved Chairman in a revolutionary afterlife (Heilbrunn, 22; Pye, 463). See also: Lu, 147; “Rooting Out Mao Worship,” (2001); “Don’t Kowtow to Mao” (2001). This being said, it should be noted that these religious characterizations are not universal. Adam Chau, for instance, argues that “even though it is not difficult to imagine some Shaanbei people asking the spirits of Mao, Zhou, and Zhu to bless and protect (*baoyou*) them – the prohibition against burning incense and spirit money hints at the existence of worship – I did not get the feeling that these were established and popular cults” (51).

⁴⁹ An obvious example of this would be the taxi-medallion phenomenon (discussed at length above), though Li’s article also describes this process in more general terms, noting that “stories about people who have had their wishes come true after praying in front of statues of Mao are widely traded in the alleys of Shaoshan” (21). As a final example, Macartney’s article describes “Tian, 24, a civil servant of local government, [who] said she wouldn’t say anything unfavorable about Mao on any occasion. Besides her affection for the great leader, she has a fear of punishment from beyond the grave for offending Mao’s spirit” (Macartney (2006)).

practices⁵⁰ and zoomorphic pantheons⁵¹ of peasant religion – both of which were extensively persecuted as “feudal superstition” (*mixin*) under the living Mao.⁵² In keeping with his (nascent) introduction into the folk religious pantheon, the popular version of Mao’s biography has also been expanded to include accounts of miracles drawn from the Chinese hagiographical/mythological corpora. These include beliefs that “at the time of his birth a flash of red light was seen in the sky” and that “a comet fell from the heavens when he died.”⁵³ Though such beliefs and practices are not universal in modern China, their cultural currency is both undeniable and understandable, built as it is upon traditional metaphors, images and tropes, as well as the mythology and iconography of the revolutionary period.

⁵⁰ The most overt instance of this phenomenon that I came across in my research was Emily Chao’s “The Maoist Shaman and the Madman,” a study that was referenced in the thesis’s introduction. In this intriguing ethnography, one finds a detailed description of a modern ritual where a shamanic practitioner, dressed in a Red Guard uniform, claimed to summon the spirits of Mao, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping to cure a madman. Describing this process, Chao suggests that the shamaness “replaced a local ritual structure comprising the gods of heaven, mountain, and earth with a nationalized ritual structure presided over by this deified postrevolutionary trinity” (509). Though many of the villagers were openly critical of this rite (especially after the departure of the shamaness) (510-511), the fact that such a ritual was considered to be potentially appropriate and meaningful is deeply suggestive: “The shaman’s ritual tells us something about the realms of possible interpretation and the conflicted fields of power that intervened to preclude their legitimization. East Wind [Village] interpretations of the shaman as an ‘identity failure’ issued from a disjuncture of experiences. Certain factors – ... [including] models of shamanic healing, collective era experiences, and the rhetorical efficacy of state discourse during the post-Mao era – all worked to challenge the legitimacy of the shaman’s identity and the imagined community that she tried to invoke” (527).

⁵¹ For an excellent, scholarly overview of the incorporation of Mao into an animistic, folk pantheon, an excellent resource can be found in Diane Dorfman’s “The Spirits of Reform: The Power of Belief in Northern China” in *China Off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom*, edited by Susan D. Blum and Lionel M. Jensen, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 323-340. An intriguing aspect of Dorfman’s ethnography concerns the means by which informants fit the mystically-potent Mao into their preexisting construals of the extrahuman cosmos. For instance, many argued that “[d]uring Mao’s campaigns against superstition, the spirits had no choice but to heed his call for the eradication of spirits and flee. A middle-aged woman who worked with one of the healers explained, “When Mao said, ‘Away with all the demons and monsters’ [*sao chu niugui sheshen*], they fled. You didn’t see any of the animal spirits around here then.’ Several people told me that Mao’s formidable power emanated from his own spiritual essence, contending that Mao was a turtle spirit, which is of an order higher than the four animal spirits. Mao was said to have known this himself, but he did not like to divulge this information” (333). Intriguingly, some evidence of this type of animistic thinking is evidenced in Mao’s own writings, where he (in private correspondence) described himself as “possessed of a tiger spirit” (Mao Zedong, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 273). The occurrences of such tropes within Mao’s own speeches and writings, while outside the scope of the present project, would provide an intriguing topic for future exploration.

⁵² For a good overview of the persecution of “feudal superstition” (*mixin*), see Ann Anagnost’s “Politics and Magic in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 13:1 (January 1987), Symposium on Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies (Part I), 40-61.

⁵³ The inclusion of these mythic events in common understandings of Mao’s life was noted by Chinese social scientists in a survey of young Chinese adults (ages 20-40). Tang Can, Zhu Rui, Li Chunling and Shen Jie, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 265. See also: Su and Jia, (*Shades of Mao*, 163). Interesting parallels can be drawn between these mythic events and episodes found in popular hagiographies of Confucius, which describe the great sage’s birth and death as having been demarcated by great celestial oddities. See, for example, Lionel M. Jensen, “The Genesis of Kongzi in Ancient Narrative: The Figurative As Historical” in *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*, edited by Thomas A. Wilson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 175-221.

A corollary to these deific descriptions of Mao can be seen in accounts that describe popular responses to the apotheosized Chairman. In a modern survey of Chinese citizens, it was found that 57% of 25-35 year-olds described their emotional stance towards Mao as a “worshipful” one.⁵⁴ Among the younger generation, historical knowledge was almost entirely absent, but was replaced by “blind worship.”⁵⁵ This tendency to conflate the political with the religious is acidly criticized by Wang Shuo, who satirically portrays a lower-class character addressing a local cadre as “dear teacher leader helmsman ... dad mum granddad grandma old ancestor primal ape Supreme Deity Jade Emperor Guanyin Bodhisattva commander-in-chief.”⁵⁶ In a similarly iconoclastic manner, Chinese political pop art, which often re-imagines the cultural legacy of Mao, is described as “vulgarizing” the “sacrosanct” – language that would seem more appropriate (to a Western listener) if used in the context of religious imagery.⁵⁷

As can be seen, the apotheosis of Mao Zedong (incomplete and fragmented as it is) can be seen as a testament to the continued cogency of traditional construals of the relationship between the human and extrahuman realms – especially among rural Chinese. While hypotheses regarding the continued relevance of these symbols and tropes will be discussed below (both in the “analysis” portion of the present chapter and in the chapter to follow), it is first necessary to examine another common image used in descriptions of the departed Chairman: the imperial ruler. Given the numerous and notable corollaries between deities and rulers contained in the traditional Chinese worldview, the usage of such images can also be seen to draw upon the extrahuman efficacy framework described at length in chapter two.

⁵⁴ Tang Can, Zhu Rui, Li Chunling and Shen Jie, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 264.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 266. In a newer article about hero (“idol”) worship among Chinese middle- and high-school students, Mao was the second highest rated idol (after pop-star Zhou Jielun) for boys and was fourth rated (after Zhou Jielun, Zhou Enlai and one’s own father) overall (96-97). He Xiaozhong, “Survey Report on Idol Worship Among Children and Young People,” *Chinese Education and Society* 39:1 (January/February 2006), 84–103. This being said, the author cautions that “the choice of idols by today’s youngsters is quite scattered and multielemental and that no single person commands universal public respect and support, or that all people are of one heart and mind” (95).

⁵⁶ Wang Shuo, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 225. Despite the contradictory purposes, both of these examples are evidence of a single tendency to approach power in a worshipful manner.

⁵⁷ Li Xianting, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 220. Similarly, Dong Tai in the *Renmin ribao* (1979) that, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, “what China is doing is not de-Maoization, but de-sacralization.” Quoted in Stuart R. Schram, “Party Leader or True Ruler? Foundations and Significance of Mao Zedong’s Political Power,” in *Foundations and Limits of State Power in China*, edited by Stuart R. Schram, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, and Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 1987), 203-256, 248 ff. 115.

Mao as Emperor

Just as Mao was deified (in some quarters) in spite of his numerous attacks upon traditional religion, so too did he come to be (partially) understood through the lens of feudal Chinese society, regardless of his criticisms of it. The paragraphs below will summarize the application of an ancient cultural category to a modern political leader.

The first major instances of this tendency are found in those sources that explicitly describe Mao as an emperor. For instance, Li Jie pointedly argues that, with Mao, “Chinese feudalism had finally reached an apogee; in the Mao Cult a perfect symmetry was achieved between politics, ethics, morals, and psychology. If we take Qin Shihuang to be the progenitor of this style of feudal culture, then Mao Zedong is its historical conclusion.”⁵⁸ Elsewhere, an article by a Chinese literary critic roundly criticizes this tendency to describe Mao as an emperor,⁵⁹ implicitly implying that it was a fairly common practice. Indeed, the identification of Mao as a ruler in the classical mode was undoubtedly exacerbated by his adherence to certain classical patterns, including his use of Tiananmen Square when addressing the public⁶⁰ and the establishment of his personal dwelling within the former imperial compound.⁶¹ Xing Lu provides an excellent summary of this particular understanding of the revered Chinese leader – an understanding that was primarily defined during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution:

⁵⁸ *Shades of Mao*, 144. Sun's revolutionary dirge also explicitly calls Mao an emperor (*Shades of Mao*, 122). In a related manner, a poem submitted to a newspaper writing contest describes Mao's son as a “princeling” (Lu Ximing, *Shades of Mao*, 251). Likewise, Mao himself is referred to as a “child of the Yellow Emperor” (Gou Huaxian, *Shades of Mao*, 256). As Ross Terrill suggests in *Mao: A Biography*, Mao “taught three generations to laugh in the face of taboos and authorities.... Yet he ended up, maybe to his own despair, as a mirror-image Son of Heaven whose every syllable was truth and law” (3). Quoted in A. P. Cheater, “Death Ritual as Political Trickster in the People's Republic of China,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 26 (July 1991), 67-97, 81.

⁵⁹ Gao Jiangbo, *Shades of Mao*, 137-38. For an example of this language in action, see Wehrfritz (1996): “‘In my mind, Chairman Mao was the best emperor of all time,’ says Wu Xuji, 64, the village's energetic party secretary. ‘We want to worship him generation after generation’” (44). By way of context, it should be noted that Mr. Wu was interviewed while worshipping at the Mao temple in Gushuicun.

⁶⁰ See Rudolph Wagner, “Reading the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in Peking: The Tribulations of the Implied Pilgrim,” in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, edited by Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yü, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 378-423: “The Communist government inherited the institutional position of the emperor. When Mao proclaimed the founding of the PRC, for instance, he stood on T'ien-an Gate facing south, where ‘the people’ had assembled on the square” (396).

⁶¹ As Schram notes, even as Mao pursued his anti-feudalistic policies, he “resided in the very courtyard, in the Zhongnanhai 中南海, where former emperors had ploughed the first furrow. The symbolic significance of the decision, taken within a few weeks of arriving in [Beijing], to move the seat of the Party and the government to this location has not yet been adequately explored” (224).

A central element of Chinese mythology is the notion that emperors are mandated by Heaven; thus, they are the ‘Sons of Heaven.’ Songs such as ‘The East is Red’ reinforced the myth that Mao was just such a deity sent by heaven to help the Chinese people lead better lives. In this way Mao was established as the legitimate leader of China, a living god who would surely bring happiness to people.⁶²

As the above quotation suggests, one of the more potent (and popular) analogies between Mao’s rule and those of the dynastic emperors was that their perceived legitimacy depended upon the perception that they possessed the proverbial “Mandate of Heaven” – a fact that was demonstrated by their efficacy in effecting change in the world.⁶³ As Schram notes, “the traditional ruler was expected to assure the wealth and power of the state,” which meant that Mao’s legitimacy was largely based upon “the success of the Communists in exercising the vocation of state power, and notably in shaping the material and moral order.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Dorfman’s fieldwork in rural Hebei sees her rural informants ascribing an emperor’s osmotic moral *de*⁶⁵ (德) to Mao:

According to people in Wulin, Mao developed a model of the good person who would lead the transformation to communism, and he lived it. He called on all Chinese to serve the people and went to villages to learn from the masses. A retired production-team leader told me Mao never had servants, had never taken any amount of money over his Central Committee salary, and had forgone meat to eat the coarse grains *nongmin* [peasants] were making do with during the famines of the early 1960s. ... It appears that it was not only the morality of Mao’s authority that legitimated his leadership; legitimation was effected in the moralizing influence Mao’s leadership had on the population as a whole.⁶⁶

⁶² Lu, 101-102. The reification of these understandings through the ritualized performance of revolutionary songs will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

⁶³ Julia Ching (not without irony) characterizes the situation as follows: That Mao and the Communists “won the civil war made them a conquering dynasty, winning the Mandate to rule over all under Heaven – except for the island of Taiwan” (250).

⁶⁴ Schram, 229. Likewise, he notes that “there can be no doubt that Mao’s successful leadership down to 1949, and indeed to 1957, was a major source of awe, *inspired by superhuman qualities and exploits*” (225, *emphasis added*).

⁶⁵ Though I believe that the phrase “osmotic moral *de*” is an original coinage, the process itself is described by Tu Weiming as follows: “political leadership [in the classical Chinese view] essentially manifests itself in moral persuasion and the transformative power of a dynasty depends mainly on the ethical quality of those who govern” (6). Similarly, Tucker suggests that “if the ruler was moral, it would have a ‘rippling out’ effect on the whole country” (8-9). Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Introduction” to *Confucian Spirituality: Volume One*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 1-35.

⁶⁶ Dorfman, 332.

In a particularly explicit parallel with imperial precedents, many Chinese commentators interpreted a disastrous earthquake in 1976 as an omen of China's loss of the Mandate, a process that was occasioned primarily by Mao's demise:

If things went awry in the political/moral sphere of the old empire, Heaven signaled disapproval in the dark language of heavenly portents, locust swarms, or earthquakes. The political crisis of 1976 – with the deaths of Chou En-lai, Chu Te, and Mao Tse-tung – was epitomized by nature's coming out of joint. The devastating earthquake in August 1976, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives and was centered close enough to the capital to collapse parts of the Peking Hotel near T'ien-an-men Square, was felt to be one such heavenly portent.⁶⁷

In addition to the overtly imperial characterizations discussed above, it should be noted that Mao often was (and continues to be) described using such imagery in a less explicit fashion. For instance, Su and Jia's saccharine elegy to the departed Chairman suggests that he “possesses a charisma that surpasses that of Qin Shihuang, Emperor Wu of the Han, as well as the founders of the Tang, Song, Ming, and Yuan dynasties.”⁶⁸ Similarly, a peasant interviewed by Chinese journalist Sang Ye drew a parallel between the humble origins of Mao and those of the “founding emperors of all China's dynasties.”⁶⁹ In a like manner, a Shanghainese culture critic extended these observations by noting many ways that Mao's leadership models and strategies are patterned upon the imperial system,⁷⁰ going so far as to poetically describe the Great Helmsman as a “polestar” – language that hearkens back to the classical Confucian description of an ideal ruler.⁷¹ In direct opposition to the Maoist call to “Destroy the Four Olds,” Hai Feng suggests that Mao's philosophy of government “has as one of its origins the rich world of

⁶⁷ Wagner, 415. Similarly, Cheater notes that “When the Tangshan earthquake preceded Mao's death by less than three months, some invoked the ‘feudal’ notion that the Mandate of Heaven was slipping” (80-81).

⁶⁸ *Shades of Mao*, 163.

⁶⁹ Sang Ye, *Shades of Mao*, 283.

⁷⁰ Li Jie, *Shades of Mao*, 141-43. Stuart Schram makes some similar observations, but offers a more nuanced analysis: “It is hard to believe that [the analogy between Maoist rule and imperial rule] did not strike Mao as well, but manifestly it did not worry him to excess. It did not worry him, I would venture to suggest, because he was so thoroughly persuaded of his own revolutionary virtue that he felt free to expose himself to any influence whatever, and to have recourse to any political means whatever, because once he had touched it, it would all be grist to the revolutionary mill. In other words, he could use a mixture of means, old and new, to achieve goals mainly new, but in some cases very old, and unerringly shape the whole process. Thus his rule was absolute in a way that of the emperors had not been, with rare exceptions, because they were dealing with an established bureaucracy, and established norms and customs. ... In the last analysis, Mao's power, like his thought, remained eclectic in essence, an uneasy amalgam of elements Chinese and Western, ancient and modern” (245).

⁷¹ Analects 2:1 (“Governing with excellence [*de* 德] can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place and all other stars pay tribute”). Compare to Su and Jia, *Shades of Mao*, 163 and 168 ff. 5.

classical Chinese thought.”⁷² This type of symbolism can even be seen in the treatment of Mao’s remains, ensconced as they were within a memorial hall that the populace insists on referring to as an “imperial shrine” (*ling mu*)⁷³ and resting upon an imposing slab of black granite from Mount Tai.⁷⁴ In a similarly symbolic manner, the wreath prepared by Jiang Qing for her husband’s funeral service was constructed of the “five grains” traditionally sacrificed to Heaven by the emperor.⁷⁵ Finally, the connection between the apotheosized Mao and nature (described above) bears some striking similarities to the traditional understanding of the connection between the ruler and the natural world.⁷⁶ As can be seen, even those sources that do not directly equate Mao with imperial leadership still find meaningful resonances within those symbolic and metaphorical systems.

Another linguistic/metaphorical connection between Mao and the imperial past is a tendency to characterize the leader as a metonym for either the country or the people as a whole. While this characterization has already been explored in the descriptions of Mao as (part of) the

⁷² *Shades of Mao*, 240.

⁷³ Though comparisons between Mao’s mausoleum and imperial *lingmu* were officially discouraged (as per Cheater 95-96; Wagner, 389; Frederic Wakeman Jr., “Mao’s Remains” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, edited by James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 254-288, 280), it remains the case that many classical images and tropes (including geomantic concerns) were included in the construction. Cheater, after describing some of this imagery, hypothesizes that “some of the innuendoes of traditional cosmology may have been built into the memorial hall by decisions and actions of the mainly rural construction workers drawn from all over China. That might explain why the design team felt it necessary, collectively, anonymously and after the event, to print their version of why the hall was what it was, making no reference whatsoever to the symbolism I have dealt with in this paper” (96). Further, all three sources document the tendency of individuals (especially peasants) to refer to the structure as a *lingmu* (Cheater (1991); Wagner (1992); Wakeman (1988)). Furthermore, the sacred quality of the site is also suggested by the prohibition of photography – a taboo that the Mao Mausoleum shares with many Chinese temples (Cheater, 93).

⁷⁴ The use of marble from Mount Tai in constructing Mao’s catafalque is tremendously symbolic, as the mountain was not only associated with imperial legitimation rituals (Ching, 28-29), but was also itself seen as a deity in the Daoist pantheon (as described in Terry F. Kleeman, “Mountain Deities in China: The Domestication of the Mountain God and the Subjugation of the Margins,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114:2 (April 1994), 226-238). Given the extent to which this choice of materials was publicized (Wagner, 408), it seems likely that these symbolic resonances were being drawn upon deliberately. See also ff. 77 (in chapter two) for more details. For some speculations on the relationship between the lionization of Mao and the legitimation of the PRC government, see the conclusion of the present study.

⁷⁵ Cheater describes the wreath as follows: “a massive affair of ‘sunflowers, green corn, golden ears of wheat, rice, and millet, and the white blossoms and fruit of the yellowhorn’ – ‘five grains’ like the life-renewing offerings once made to Heaven itself” at the Altar of the Country in the nearby Palace Museum – Jiang’s wreath used imperial tradition to symbolize Mao’s transcendence even over death” (84). The symbolism of this wreath is also discussed in Wakeman, 269.

⁷⁶ Fitzgerald, 36-38, 59. It should be noted that the imperial rites were themselves understood to be the process by which the emperor’s power regulated the natural world, further demonstrating the undeniable connection between the emperor and the natural world. See also: Feuchtwang (2001), 29-30.

natural order, it can also be seen in similarities between the popular view of the Chairman and the classical “One Man” paradigm, which described monarchs as unitary beings, single-handedly bridging the gap between humanity and Heaven.⁷⁷ As Lu notes, such unitary approaches to Mao became all-too-common following the Cultural Revolution, for “once Mao was deified and his writings elevated to the level of scripture, there was no longer any clear line of demarcation between Mao, Mao Zedong’s Thought, the Communist Party, and the nation. Terms used in reference to the party, Chairman Mao, and China were often used synonymously.”⁷⁸ This metonymical connection can also be seen in the construction and placement of the Mao Mausoleum, which situates the remains of the Chairman “along the imperial axis”⁷⁹ in the absolute center of Beijing, which is the symbolic center of China (and, more broadly, the center of “all under Heaven” (天下 *tianxia*)).⁸⁰ In this way, Mao, even in death, continues to symbolically serve as the locus of Chinese society.

The continued cogency of this approach to the Great Helmsman can be seen in the writings of an anonymous Chinese contributor in a popular online forum, where he (or she) passionately avers:

CHAIRMAN MAO
is the 1.3 billion..
the 1.3 billion are CHAIRMAN MAO..
...
the WEST tries to destroy the greatest heroe [sic].... the greatest Icon..
so that it can destroy all other Chinese...
and...
without CHAIRMAN MAO
there would be no CHINA and there would be no heroes...
CHINA is CHAIRMAN MAO
and CHAIRMAN MAO is CHINA
...

⁷⁷ Ching, 115, 255, 261.

⁷⁸ Lu, 104.

⁷⁹ Wagner, 396. This geomantic axis, which subdivides the Forbidden City, the Imperial Palaces, and Tiananmen Square, is central to Beijing’s status as a sacred city (as argued in Meyer (1991)).

⁸⁰ “The hall is centered exactly on Beijing’s geomantic north-south axis, and Mao’s body lies fractionally to the south of exact centre in the square hall, at the point of most concentrated geomantic force in a tomb. The axis now runs through his body as well as the imperial throne, prompting Zhang to remark on the risk of imperial comparison engendered by this linkage along the axis” (Cheater, 91).

and thank you always..
CHAIRMAN MAO
for the one China...⁸¹

Though this screed was obviously the work of a single devotee, its resonances with the affective responses to Mao explored above suggest that that many would echo its sentiments.

One potential origin of this trend can be noted within Mao's publicly expressed self-understanding. In an early poem, he drops the names of China's most famous emperors (including Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi), but suggests that he transcends them, stating: "For truly great men // Look to this age alone."⁸² In this way, he interpolates himself into the historical discourse. In a published letter to Jiang Qing, Mao defends his style of leadership by unapologetically stating that, "[t]hat's the type of king I am."⁸³ As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the public seized upon the imperial mode of discourse as an appropriate one for the description of their (pseudo-)sacred leader.

Analysis

As has been demonstrated in the previous sections, pre-modern "religious" understandings of the extrahuman world and imperial power were often utilized in popular descriptions of Mao Zedong (albeit in a partial or imprecise fashion). Indeed, the naturalness of the fit between these classical "religious" perspectives and the deification of the Great Helmsman is eloquently demonstrated by the claim that Mao would, after all, "be a god one day"⁸⁴ – an off-hand statement that encapsulated my own findings to such an extent that I included it in the title of the present research project. While various explanations of the posthumous reassessment of Mao have been proposed in the literature (as will be outlined below), I would argue that these sources often fail to provide a sufficiently nuanced account of the phenomena – a failing that is largely occasioned by their lack of attention to relevant historical patterns. It is hoped that the present exploration aids in resolving this lacuna.

⁸¹ These comments were made in the *China Daily*'s forums. Poster's username: chairman, comment #358, message posted 2007-1-24 09:36 PM.
<http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/viewthread.php?gid=2&tid=280732&extra=page%3D5&page=18>

⁸² Mao Zedong, quoted in Li, *Shades of Mao*, 143.

⁸³ Mao Zedong, quoted in Zhang, *Shades of Mao*, 273.

⁸⁴ Macartney (2006). This quotation is discussed in more detail in the introduction.

One of the most prominent of these approaches tends to view the public's redefinition of Mao as a form of "totalitarian nostalgia,"⁸⁵ wherein the moral and social failings of the current administration are (implicitly) critiqued through the valorization of the Maoist social order (in general) and Mao's character (in specific).⁸⁶ On some levels, this construal of history should not be surprising. After all, for many Chinese, the Maoist period has been idealized in the popular imagination as the height of sincerity, equality and altruism,⁸⁷ especially among the lower classes that were valorized by Mao and later disenfranchised by Deng's corrupt, economically driven society.⁸⁸

This "totalitarian nostalgia" is strikingly apparent in a description of Chinese political Pop Art as characterized by "an obsession that combined both a nostalgia for the simpler, less corrupt, and more self-assured period of Mao's rule with a desire to appropriate Mao Zedong, the paramount God of the past, in ventures satirizing life and politics in contemporary China."⁸⁹ In fact, many commentators argue that the vast majority of the Mao Craze in the early nineties was dependent upon dissatisfaction with the present regime.⁹⁰ Supporting this contention, implicit and explicit comparisons to Mao and the Maoist period are the primary means used by both the party and the general populace to critique Deng's modernizations.⁹¹ Some Chinese theorists even argue that the popular deification and worship of Mao are a direct result of dissatisfaction with

⁸⁵ The term "totalitarian nostalgia," originally coined to describe the longing of Russian ex-proletarians for the relative simplicity and unambiguousness of the USSR, is usefully expropriated by Geremie Barmé to describe a similar process among Chinese peasants during the economic and social turmoil following the death of Mao. In *The Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 316-344.

⁸⁶ This approach guides many of the indigenous contributors to *Shades of Mao* (many of which are summarized below). See also: Heilbrunn (1997); Kristof (1992); Wehrfritz (1996). While both Dorfman (2002) and Barmé (1999) make some similar claims, both of their analyses are sufficiently nuanced as to avoid the reductive tendency that characterizes many descriptions of the posthumous Mao cult as a simple instance of "totalitarian nostalgia."

⁸⁷ Liu, *Shades of Mao*, 170. In a similar vein, Zhang argues that Mao, despite any errors that he might have made, has become an essential symbol for the proper Chinese attitude towards the world, and that remembering him is key to China's continued independence and selfhood (*Shades of Mao*, 274). In personal conversations with Chinese students (both urban and rural) in the summer of 2005, I discovered that many of them idealized Mao (and the Maoist period), and were often either unaware of or unwilling to talk about the problematic elements of Mao's leadership (such as the Great Leap Forward).

⁸⁸ Note: though both of these characterizations are obvious stereotypes, they are indeed part of popular usage. See, for example, Wehrfritz, 44. As an ironic side-note, it is interesting that Deng himself (*Shades of Mao*, 118) and various Party supporters continually argue that the modern reforms are completely in accordance with Mao's doctrines (indeed, Hua "boldfacedly" states that Deng's modernizations are "the crystallization of the living essence of Mao Zedong Thought" (*Shades of Mao*, 150)). Likewise, the Central Department of Propaganda states that remembering and following Mao Thought is the key to the success of the modernizations (*Shades of Mao*, 235).

⁸⁹ Li Xianting, *Shades of Mao*, 216.

⁹⁰ Deng Liqun, *Shades of Mao*, 152.

⁹¹ Liu Xiaobo, *Shades of Mao*, 276.

the present regime's policies.⁹² These conclusions are congruent with Dorfman's survey of peasant folk beliefs, where she suggests that the rise in attacks by animal spirits (spirits that were driven into hiding by Mao's spiritual potency) “stand as cosmic support for denunciation of Deng and may be read as empowering the dispossessed by affirming legitimate cosmological authority that they can claim supersedes Deng's corrupt regime.”⁹³ Geremie Barmé's *In the Red* provides a penetrating insight into the context underlying this indigenous approach to recent history:

In China, the events of 1988 and 1989 – natural disasters and economic uncertainties followed by a fear of national collapse and mass protests against corruption, and the lack of freedoms followed by the ill-managed government suppression of the 1989 protests, the equivocal response of the Western democracies, and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe – all served to encourage the nascent Mao cult. As is so often the case when people face economic uncertainty and social anomie, old cultural symbols, cults, practices, and beliefs are spontaneously revived to provide a framework of cohesion and meaning for a threatening world. To many, Mao was representative of an age of certainty and confidence, of cultural and political unity, and, above all, of economic equality and incorruptibility.⁹⁴

All of these cases described above are evidence of the “revolutionary nostalgia” approach to the posthumous apotheosization of Mao.

While certain insights can be garnered through this approach, the problem is that it is both insufficiently nuanced and somewhat reductionistic. Though it is undeniable that many Chinese commentators were indeed using the history/imagery of the Maoist period to critique present historical realities (and, as such, indulging in the prototypical form of Chinese historiography),⁹⁵ it nevertheless seems unjustifiable to assume that such critiques were the sole (or even primary) motivation for the development of the beliefs and practices described above. In

⁹² See Hou, *Shades of Mao*, 213. See also Liu Xiaobo, *Shades of Mao*: “Every time Reform suffers a setback, whenever social tensions are exacerbated, people from the highest echelons of the Party to the broad masses pay homage once more at the altar of Mao Zedong and seek to negate the policies of Deng Xiaoping.... [S]till they worship him” (280).

⁹³ Dorfman, 334.

⁹⁴ Barmé (1999), 321.

⁹⁵ K. C. Chang's “Archaeology and Chinese Historiography,” *World Archaeology* 13:2 (October 1981), Regional Traditions of Archaeological Research I, pp. 156-169, provides a good summary of the moralistic paradigm of Chinese historiography: “Since history records the rights and wrongs of the past, it provides guidance for future behavior. As put by Sima Qian, the great Chinese historian of the late second century BC, ‘Events of the past, if not forgotten, are teachings about the future.’ The historian achieves this by appealing to people's (especially the rulers') vanity and concern for their own posterity. When Confucius was compiling the *Chun Chiu*, or Spring-and-Autumn Annals, ‘the usurping officials and the seditionists’ are said to have become highly apprehensive, for their misdeeds and moral turpitude were sure to be inscribed for posterity” (157).

particular, while the utilization of such imagery in a protest, an article or an editorial would have been a rhetorically sound strategy, it would have been utterly excessive to participate in the worship and adulation directed at Mao (especially after his death) in order to make a political statement. Instead, it seems more reasonable to assume that the seemingly religious elements of the posthumous Mao cult emerged from resonances between its tenets and practices and those of traditional Chinese religious observances, with the notable proviso that these responses were often predicated upon the creative interpretation of cultural materials. This contention will be explored below.

Rather than concentrating upon the reductionistic discourse of totalitarian nostalgia, it is more compelling to follow the examples of Geremie Barmé and Frederic Wakeman and to concentrate upon the process whereby the historical Mao came to be decoupled from his life as a political leader, becoming instead an ambiguous referent. As Barmé notes, by the late 1980s, “the image of Mao, long since freed from his stifling holy aura and the odium of his destructive policies, became a ‘floating sign,’ a vehicle for nostalgic reinterpretation, unstated opposition to the status quo, and even satire.”⁹⁶ Wakeman makes a similar argument concerning the ambiguities inherent in the treatment of Mao’s material remains:

The boundary between person and persona, between thinking and thought, is indistinct. The central tomb and the axial rooms awkwardly contain both parts of Mao, so that the personal shrine and the public memorial are mutually denatured. Like Chiang Kai-shek’s corpse, which is said to be only halfway home to its final resting place, Mao’s body is preserved in a kind of limbo, uneasily caught between individual transcendence and collective immortality. ... Chairman Mao’s remains, in the end, survive, uncomfortably, vulnerable to public view.⁹⁷

In both cases, Mao remains a salient image and a potential source of power and legitimacy. What has changed, however, is that the totalizing discourse, which characterized the officially endorsed cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution,⁹⁸ largely collapsed, leaving the populace free to attend to those elements of the deceased Chairman’s character that were personally

⁹⁶ Barmé (1999), 320.

⁹⁷ Wakeman, 288.

⁹⁸ Daniel Leese describes the top-down, coercive nature of the Cultural Revolution in “The Mao Cult as Communicative Space,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8:3 (2007), 623-639. In particular, he argues that the religious elements that developed at the popular level were, at best, epiphenomenal. I disagree with this point, as I feel that it ignores the general role that popular discourse plays in the creation of social realities. Further, it also fails to address the continued salience of these popular understandings of Mao, especially after their official denunciation by the State.

meaningful to them.⁹⁹ As Lu notes, “Mao has become an integral part of [the] Chinese culture and psyche. Whether hated as a despotic leader or loved as a kind of god/saint, his ghost will continue to haunt Chinese people. Myths and legends about him will continue to loom large.”¹⁰⁰ In this decontextualized milieu, it is perhaps unsurprising that many Chinese citizens came to rely upon the images and conceptual structures of popular religion (as described in chapter two) to explain the continued emotional and social cogency of Mao in their society. The factors that made such an identification possible will now be explored.

The first important parallel between the reappropriated Mao and traditional belief systems is the centrality of efficacy, as demonstrated in various elements of these characterizations. Just as reverence of traditional deities was largely dependent upon their perceived *ling* (magical power) and their seeming willingness to act within this world,¹⁰¹ so too was the posthumous cult of Mao centered upon his ability to provide religious goods to those who propitiated him. This process can be explicated through the use of a chemical analogy. The popular tale of Mao’s protection of the nameless southern taxi-drivers can be seen as a sort of catalyst, as it was partially responsible for the crystallization of Mao veneration that followed. However, just as in any other chemical reaction, the ingredients for this process were already present (in this case, the powerful, mysterious “open signifier” of Mao and the language of traditional religious belief); they simply required an additional, external impetus. This impetus was amply provided in the popular narrative of Mao’s posthumous efficacy in protecting a devotee’s taxi, as this tale creatively reapplied existing cultural materials in a fashion that was both compelling and immediately meaningful to its auditors (via the process of narrative accrual).

Further, it is notable that, once Mao was slotted into the category of *shen*, it was assumed that he would miraculously provide other benefits to the “faithful” (including wealth, longevity and (male) progeny) – all of which were central concerns of traditional popular religion.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ With this development, Mao became a part of the canon of Chinese culture, after which point he (and the imagery surrounding him) became available for future narrative construction (following Bruner’s principle of narrative accrual).

¹⁰⁰ Lu, 147.

¹⁰¹ See: Chau (2006), chapter two (above).

¹⁰² See: Poo (1998), Chapter 2 (above). This expansion of Mao’s perceived spheres of supernatural influence is of significant for its relevance insight it grants into the role of analogies in human (and particularly religious) thought. For example, once the Chairman was admitted (however provisionally) into the pantheon, it was naturally assumed

Finally, the manner in which Mao (an undeniably powerful but morally ambiguous despot) became reinterpreted as a deity also has powerful religious antecedents, as many popular Chinese deities (such as Guan Gong, Wenchang and many local Dragon Kings) were similarly ambiguous figures that were spiritually “defanged” through popular adulation.¹⁰³

Even the descriptions of Mao as an emperor were at least tangentially dependent upon traditional religious concepts. As established previously, both the classical (elite)¹⁰⁴ and popular¹⁰⁵ understandings of imperial leadership were contingent upon a religiously mandated construal of the cosmos (and the role of human beings within it). In a similar manner, Wang Yi, a Chinese scholar represented in Barmé’s Shades of Mao, suggests that “the people tend to view divine providence and spiritual power in political terms.”¹⁰⁶ Building upon the partial identification between the categories of emperor and god (as elaborated in chapter two), I would argue that the usage of both images to describe Mao is indicative of the power ascribed to him. Just as Arthur C. Clarke noted that “any sufficiently advanced technology will be indistinguishable from magic,” so too does the popular Chinese worldview characterize any sufficiently powerful form of efficacy as *ling*. Though it would be foolish to deny the simple structural analogy between Mao and his imperial precedents,¹⁰⁷ I think that this imagery is only compelling because of the Chairman’s seemingly miraculous ability to effect change in the world (whether it is described as *ling*, *de* or possession of the Mandate of Heaven).

In this way, even when Chinese believers hearken back to the Maoist past as a form of “totalitarian nostalgia,” these reminiscences are often shaped by the redefinition of Mao within

that he would provide the same benefits as other revered extrahuman beings. Not only is this type of analogical thinking foundational to human thought in general (as noted in Pinker (1999) and Hofstadter (1985)), it is a particularly relevant characteristic of religious belief (as per Boyer (2001)).

¹⁰³ This phenomenon is also suggested by the lack of posited ontological distinctions between ghosts, gods and ancestors (as noted in Wolf (1974); Harrell (1974); and in Chapter 2 (above)).

¹⁰⁴ Fitzgerald provides an excellent overview of the religious dimensions of the imperial office. For example, the rule of a Chinese monarch “was intimately bound up with the fate of the gods of soil and grain; indeed, the state or dynasty is often referred to as ‘the gods of soil and grain,’ and the ruin of a kingdom described in the formula ‘the sacrifices were interrupted’” (38).

¹⁰⁵ As can be seen in the hierarchical organization of the popular Chinese pantheon, governed, as it is, by the Jade Emperor.

¹⁰⁶ Xin, quoted in Shades of Mao, 196.

¹⁰⁷ This simplistic syllogism could most easily be phrased as follows:

- The emperors ruled China.
- Mao ruled China
- Mao is an emperor.

traditional paradigms. Many of the themes and parallels discussed above can be seen in Dorfman's ethnographic description of a peasant village's response to Mao in the early 1990s:

[Mao] is remade in the *nongmin* [peasant] image, his power translated into an alternative, localized language. He transcends the bounds of the official – moral or immoral – to inhabit the cosmic realm, but only because he can be identified with poor *nongmin*. Mao is situated in the most distant, loft realm from which power is imposed on mere *nongmin* mortals and brought into the villages as the most prosaic model for the moral masses' transformation. *Nongmin* remade themselves in Mao's image as revolutionary heroes and remade Mao in their image as a turtle [spirit]. The multivalency and ambivalence that is embodied in Mao is exemplified by Du's memory of his maternal grandfather, a powerful healer who equated his powers with Mao's. "The old man pointed to Mao's portrait and said, 'When I go, you go; we're equal,' and a few months after the old man died, Mao died. Mao was a *shen* [spirit]," said Du. Liu Ge's belief that the nation's leaders are masters of magical powers conveys a similar message that might be termed a *projected articulation*; people are saying not only that their beliefs are held by officials but that the latter's power and authority in politics extends to the spiritual realm as well. ... Mao's power emanated, not from Mao himself, from his armies, or from his control of the press alone, but from diverse, complexly intersecting social relations. Mao must become a turtle to command the people of Wulin. They make him a turtle and thus their ruler. Deng is opposed by the spirits; as a mere mortal he will never command the total submission of *nongmin*, who will not produce his power.¹⁰⁸

In this way, Dorfman's research highlights the complex interplay between traditional cultural patterns (such as cosmological theories and conceptions of the relationship between political and spiritual power) and the realities of life in modern China (such as peasant disenfranchisement in the post-Maoist period).¹⁰⁹

While the functional and developmental parallels between the posthumous Mao cult and traditional religious beliefs are instructive, they leave a central question unanswered: from whence did the public estimation of the deceased Chairman's magical efficacy arise? I would suggest that, over and above his obvious political power, one of the primary means whereby Mao's charisma was extended throughout the country was through ritual practice, which can function to inculcate non-discursive (yet socially functional) beliefs and attitudes. To explore these contentions, we must now turn our attention to ritual (in general) and Maoist practice (in particular).

¹⁰⁸ Dorfman, 337.

¹⁰⁹ This creative application of cultural materials is discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

Chapter 4: Ritual and Efficacy – Theoretical Perspectives and Their Application to the Mao Phenomenon

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, classical Chinese cosmology (to the extent that it can be described as a discrete viewpoint) was characterized by its multivalency and porosity, blurring the distinctions between numerous (Western) analytical categories, such as elite/popular, Daoist/Buddhist/Confucian/folk, and even secular/sacred. In particular, the human and extrahuman realms, rather than existing as two entirely disparate spheres, are often described (metaphorically or otherwise) as a single, mutually-interpenetrating totality, with ghosts, gods and ancestors sharing food, space and even organizational structures with the living. This “collapsed” cosmology is nowhere more apparent than in the case of those beings thought to possess magical efficacy (*ling* 靈 and/or *de* 德), as evidenced by the perceived power of extrahuman beings to influence the health, prosperity and happiness of the living, and the parallel power of emperors, officials, and religious professionals to consult, govern, and even punish the denizens of the invisible world. This multivalency was perhaps most pronounced in the particular case of the emperor, as he was not only seen as a metonym for the human social order and the natural order of the cosmos (*Dao* 道), but was also considered to be an intermediary between the human and extrahuman realms (in his role as the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi* 天子)). Further, once these connections are established, it becomes clear that the popular use of the language of gods and emperors in describing Chairman Mao is not only consistent with traditional Chinese usages, but is also a meaningful construal of the relationship(s) between charisma, efficacy, popular adulation, and political reality.

With all of this said, these (provisional) conclusions leave a number of central problems unaddressed. In particular, one is confronted by the question of why these beliefs are/were compelling, and what effect(s) they had (and continue to have) upon the lives of those holding them. Given that the answers to these questions are central to the present enterprise, we will now turn our attention to them.

To this end, the current chapter focuses on ritual, as I contend that ritual action provides a key to understanding the means by which both the religious goods and the metaphorical/cosmological relationships described in the previous chapter are created, reinforced and reified – a point that will be made with reference to both Chinese materials and modern theoretical perspectives.¹ These conclusions will then be explicitly applied to the Mao-era materials, where the general features of Chinese ritual described below will be considered in light of their analogues within the cult of Mao.

On Ritual: Introductory Materials

Unlike the Western intellectual world, where the analysis of ritual was relatively slow to develop (due, in large part, to the philosophical focus on the search for ontological truths over practical social realities),² Chinese thought has, over many millennia, developed and honed complex and multifarious understandings of the nature and function of ritual in human society. Below I provide a brief overview of these understandings, with the aim of sketching out the continuum of Chinese ritual thought and practice. This exposition draws upon both theoretical materials, such as the writings of Confucius, Xunzi, and later Confucian thinkers,³ and practical accounts, as described in various popular ritual manuals and in the observations of modern-day ethnographers (including Adam Chau, P. Steven Sangren, and Richard Madsen). While some may discount the validity of bringing together these diachronically diverse materials, it is my considered opinion (following Paper and others) that cultural and social phenomena recurring in

¹ It should be noted that ritual remains a contentious topic in modern humanities and social science research, to the extent that various issues surrounding it (including definitions, perceived functions, and relationship(s) with ideology) remain hotly debated. While the following exposition will explore some of these understandings, it will necessarily remain but a partial overview due to the limitations of space. This being said, I am profoundly intrigued by the intersection(s) between Western theoretical approaches to ritual, classical and modern Chinese perspectives, and the lived practice of modern Chinese people, meaning that I will undoubtedly use the present chapter as a foundation for future research into these related topics.

² In particular, this search for philosophical truth, which typically took place in the abstracted world of cosmology and metaphysics, and only gradually evolved into a search for empirical truths about the natural world, was relatively slow to apply these scientific methods to the study of human minds and human societies. As a result, the Western understanding of ritual was comparatively slow to develop, with many scholars characterizing ritual as empty formalism or archaic survival into the mid-twentieth century. It has only been in the last sixty years that the unique role of ritual in the formation of human psyches and social orders has begun to be addressed (Bell, 1-92). See below for an overview of this performative, constitutive approach to ritual studies.

³ It should be noted that all of the above thinkers and texts are generally grouped into the Confucian school. While this could be read as reflecting my own (admitted) bias towards Confucianism, it is more motivated by the fact that this school of thought was profoundly concerned with the role of ritual in the proper functioning of society – a position that makes them tremendously relevant to the current study.

one region throughout history can, barring evidence to the contrary, be assumed to exist as part of an unbroken, though undoubtedly evolving, continuum.⁴ It is under this assumption that I proceed.

As an additional methodological point, it should be noted that the following exploration makes use of a distinction between the understandings of ritual common in various strata of Chinese society (e.g., elite, popular, philosophical). While such distinctions are useful as a general organizational principle, it must be acknowledged that they bear (at best) a loose correspondence to the lived realities of historical Chinese people. In particular, these boundaries were porously defined at best, with elite levels of discourse diffused throughout society in both overt⁵ and subliminal⁶ manners, and with popular practice exerting considerable influence on the development of elite theories.⁷ As such, these differentiations must be seen as a form of

⁴ It should be noted that neither I nor Paper would argue that the vicissitudes of Chinese history were unimportant or insignificant, but rather that the cultures of each historical period were gradually normalized by their shared practices, their relatively unchanging bureaucratic hierarchies, and their cultural valorization of continuity over change (as described in Ames, xii-xiii; James L. Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, edited by James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 3-19). While this perspective does not ignore the gradual evolution of cultural forms, it also acknowledges that many Chinese religious practices are of considerable antiquity (as noted in Paper (1995), Poo (1998), Watson (1988)). The argument for acknowledging the continued importance of the Chinese historical context is also made in the first chapter of the present study.

⁵ One recurrent example of an overt attempt to influence the popular application of ritual can be seen in the ritual manuals published by reigning dynasties – tomes that outlined the correct means of conducting interpersonal affairs, as well as propitiating gods and ancestors, based upon the standards upheld by the royal family. In these texts, imperial rituals were presented as paradigmatic behaviours, whose differences from the prescribed actions of underlings were merely a question of degree (as an example from the *Rites of the Great Ching* demonstrates): “Various ceremonial and canonical works have been examined and combined, and thus compiled to make the Guest Ritual. *Then the ceremonial usages for visits among the multitude of officials, the gentry, and the common people were appended afterward, each according to its correct category.*” James L. Hevia, “Imperial Guest Ritual” in *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 471-487, 476 and *passim* (emphasis added). However, the adoption of these systems (in an admittedly piecemeal fashion) was not simply motivated by the (pseudo-) mythological prestige accorded to the office of the emperor (described at length in chapter three), but also by the desire for this-worldly success, as many of those who wished to advance in the imperial bureaucracy studied and followed those ritual prescriptions assiduously. These manuals (and their role in literati society) are also discussed in the introduction to Ebrey’s translation of Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), (xxi, xxvii-xxix).

⁶ The five phases/yin-yang cosmology (which was largely conflated with Daoism by the end of the Warring States Period) (see: Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985), 350-382) provides the most pervasive instance of this process, whereby theories and practices traditionally associated with a particular tradition gradually came to percolate through fields as varied as aesthetics, cuisine and martial arts.

⁷ See, for example, the allowances made for popular practice in the ritual manuals prepared by Neo-Confucians, where, in many cases, all practices were deemed acceptable save those with an explicitly Buddhist provenance. Patricia Ebrey, “The Liturgies for Sacrifices to Ancestors in Successive Versions of the *Family Rituals*” in *Ritual*

academic shorthand – helpful for increasing clarity but representing an idealized picture of the relationship between various instantiated understandings. Further, such an approach tends to downplay the commonalities between the various spheres of discourse under discussion, which is contrary to the focus of the present study, given my attempt to outline broad, ubiquitous patterns in Chinese culture *in general* rather than becoming bogged down in minute details.

Finally, it should be noted that the present study's approach to ritual is mandated by my attempt to avoid creating an "Orientalizing" discourse in my description of modern Chinese thought and practice (a concern addressed in the introduction to this work). One major issue with much ritual scholarship – especially in the writings of Western academics – is a tendency to approach the materials in a reductionistic (and even implicitly paternalistic) manner, often by assuming that rituals are simply coercive tools mandated by elites to control a credulous populace.⁸ James Laidlaw provides a cogent summary of this perspective:

It can only apply if participants themselves do not subscribe to the theory. That is, ritual by [their] own account can only perform its function behind the backs of celebrants, whose own attention is gripped by 'erroneous belief' and faith in magical efficacy. No one could be committed to ritual performance in the required sense, and nor could participation in ritual have the required psychological impact, if it were regarded as mere mumbo-jumbo that happened to have beneficial side-effects.⁹

Though he does not explicitly argue for the universal applicability of his conclusions, he goes on to argue that this understanding of ritual is certainly an inaccurate representation of its role in Chinese life:

Scholar-officials who took up and elaborated theories such as Xunzi's were not commenting on the benign effects that certain illusory and superstitious notions had on other people. They were reflecting on activities central to their own way of life. This was the scholarly elite of the empire describing what Janousch here calls 'its most hallowed occupation.' The theme of ritual as promoting social harmony was repeatedly emphasized

and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies, edited by David Johnson, (Berkeley, CA: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 104-136. See, in particular, 121-126.

⁸ Such a perspective is presented in P. Steven Sangren's "Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and the Structure of Value in Chinese Rituals," *Modern China*, 13:1 (January 1987), 63-89, which argues that popular Chinese "epistemologies and the institutions in which they are embodied and reproduced *depend on suppressing consciousness of their own genesis in social reproduction*. This suppression is not consciously motivated, but is rather a necessary condition for the process of social reproduction itself" (63-64, *emphasis added*). This quotation, which eloquently summarizes the paternalistic discourse railed against by Laidlaw (as quoted above), was not chosen as a particular critique of Sangren, but rather as a representative sample of this approach to the study of ritual.

⁹ James Laidlaw, "On theatre and theory: reflections on ritual in imperial Chinese politics" in State and Court Ritual in China, edited by Joseph P. McDermott, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 399-417, 412-413.

by officials with great personal commitment to ritual exactitude, and was at times accompanied by intense concern with as near as possible reconstruction of ancient – and therefore, they believed, authentic – ritual practice.¹⁰

Thus, instead of adopting the type of reductionistic discourse Laidlaw cautions against, the following analysis makes use of a hermeneutic of generosity, which proceeds under the assumption that Chinese ritual participants were and are both creative and critical in their approach to the various ritual practices that are woven into the fabric of their society.¹¹ Rather than assuming that they are simply uneducated or foolish, it is far more reasonable (and more compatible with indigenous theories and ethnographic evidence) to suggest that these practices are consciously utilized by the members of Chinese society who largely acknowledge their valuable social functions – a contention that will be explored in detail below.

Ritual in Chinese Society – Practical and Theoretical Concerns

The central role of ritual in Chinese society – elite and popular, past and present – is well-established in contemporary scholarship, as supported by considerable evidence from both Western and indigenous sources. While many of these ritual practices (including divination, the propitiation of gods and the veneration of ancestors) have analogues in other cultures, a defining feature of Chinese ritualism is its multimodal character. This fact is evidenced in the etymology of the term itself, as *li* 禮 (the classical term for ritual) describes not only the overtly “religious” practices listed above, but also etiquette and social propriety. Indeed, the multifarious nature of *li* (in its indigenous context) is elegantly explored by Ames and Rosemont, in their introduction to the *Analects*:

Li are those meaning-invested roles, relationships, and institutions which facilitate communication, and which foster a sense of community. The compass is broad: all formal conduct, from table manners to patterns of greeting and leave-taking, to graduations, weddings and funerals, from gestures of deference to ancestral sacrifices –

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹¹ This assumption is made in light of a considerable body of modern scholarship on Chinese ritual, which emphasizes the role of popular custom and individual imagination in the (re)interpretation and transformation of ritual practice. For some examples, see Ellen Oxfeld’s “‘When You Drink Water, Think of Its Source’: Morality, Status, and Reinvention in Rural Chinese Funerals,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63:4 (November 2004), 961-990; Donald S. Sutton’s “Consuming Counterrevolution: The Ritual and Culture of Cannibalism in Wuxuan, Guangxi, China, May to July 1968,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37:1 (January 1995), 136-175; Joseph P. McDermott’s “Emperor, élites, and commoners: the community pact ritual of the late Ming” in *State and Court Ritual in China*, edited by Joseph P. McDermott, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 299-351. Examples from these studies will be drawn upon below.

all of these, and more, are *li*. They are a social grammar that provides each member with a defined place and status within the family, community, and polity. *Li* are life forms transmitted from generation to generation as repositories of meaning, enabling the youth to appropriate persisting values and to make them appropriate to their own situations.¹²

As can be seen, the classical understanding of ritual – much like the Chinese cosmology described in the previous chapters – can also be characterized by its porosity, in this case due to the multiple modes within which ritualized behaviours were thought to be appropriate or desirable.

Indigenous Approaches to Ritual

Though many schools of thought in Chinese history put forward positions on the topic, ritual (in the expanded sense described above by Ames and Rosemont) occupied the most central place in the theoretical and practical treatises of the Confucian school. This focus can be traced back at least as far as *The Analects*, within which the body of *li* served as a primary (if somewhat incipiently defined) means of regulating human behavior. Indeed, the text explicitly ties achievement of highest moral excellence (*ren* 仁) with the correct application of patterns of behaviour inculcated through ritual practice:

Yan Hui said, “Could I ask what becoming authoritative [*ren* 仁] entails?” The Master replied, “Do not look at anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not listen to anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not speak about anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety.”¹³

¹² Ames and Rosemont, 51. This perspective on ritual is also put forth in Herbert Fingarette’s *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972): “Characteristic of Confucius’s teaching is the use of the language and imagery of *li* as a medium within which to talk about the entire body of *mores*, or more precisely, of the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society.... Men become truly human as their raw impulse is shaped by *li*. And *li* is the fulfillment of human impulse, the civilized expression of it – not a formalistic dehumanization. *Li* is the specifically humanizing form of the dynamic relation of man-to-man” (6-7). For a more extreme description of the role of ritual and practice in Chinese society, see Chad Hansen’s *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), which is entirely predicated upon a vision of early Chinese thought as praxical (as opposed to creedal or doctrinal).

¹³ *Analects* 12:1 (Ames and Rosemont’s translation). A similar point is also made in *Analects* 8:2, wherein Confucius argues that the rules (and practices) of *li* form a necessary corrective to various potentially problematic personality traits and social habits: “The Master said, ‘Deference unmediated by observing ritual propriety (*li*) is lethargy; caution unmediated by observing ritual propriety is timidity; boldness unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rowdiness; candor unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rudeness. Where exemplary people (*junzi*) are earnestly committed to their parents, the people will aspire to authoritative conduct (*ren*); where they do not neglect their old friends, the people will not be indifferent to each other.’”

In addition to this “social scientific” understanding of the role of ritual in interpersonal relations and moral cultivation (an angle that was more fully elaborated by Xunzi), the *Analects* also portray Confucius arguing for the osmotic efficacy of the rites in ordering human life, at least when executed by those in a position of power/authority: “Lead them with excellence [*de*] and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.”¹⁴ The same point is made more forcefully in *Analects* 9:14:

The Master wanted to go and live amongst the nine clans of the Eastern Yi Barbarians. Someone said to him, “What would you do about their crudeness?” The Master replied, “Were an exemplary person (*junzi*) [i.e., an individual whose conduct had been disciplined by the rules of *li*] to live among them, what crudeness could there be?”¹⁵

As can be seen, the *Analects* clearly assumed a framework within which ritual served to temper human behaviour. However, even after the elucidation of this general premise, it was not until the time of Xunzi that a precise theory was formulated concerning the means through which this transformational process occurred.

In particular, Xunzi, a third-century BCE Confucian whose dense scholarly writings were influenced by his polymathic understanding of the current social and philosophical climates, considered ritual to be the key to orderly interpersonal relationships and (more broadly) to social stability. In his view, these rites provided those willing to learn them with universally applicable standards of behaviour:

If the plumb line is properly stretched, then there can be no doubt about crooked and straight; if the scales are properly hung, there can be no doubt about heavy and light; ... and if the gentleman is well versed in ritual, then he cannot be fooled by deceit and artifice. The line is the acme of straightness, the scale is the acme of fairness, ... and rites are the highest achievement of the Way (*dao*) of man. Therefore, those who do not follow and find satisfaction in rites may be called people without direction, but those who do follow and find satisfaction in them are called men of direction.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Analects* 2:3. See also *Analects* 14:41: “The Master said, ‘If those in high station cherish the observance of ritual propriety (*li*), the common people will be easy to deal with.’” As seen in Chapter Three, this traditional ascription of osmotic moral efficacy to political leaders was evidenced in the popular response to Mao.

¹⁵ *Analects* 9:14. The extrahuman potency that is ascribed to *li* in the *Analects* is acknowledged by Frederick W. Mote in his forward to Tu Wei-ming’s *Way, Learning and Politics*: “The other-than-human sanctions for and sponsorship of the civilization’s ethical norms and ritual practices seems to imply the existence of a guiding force somewhere beyond the realm of self-contained organismic process” (xvii). This claim is granted additional force by the fact that Mote is, by-and-large, a critic of the hypothesis that Confucianism possesses a “religious” dimension.

¹⁶ *Xunzi* 19 (Watson (1967) 95).

Given that, in his view, individuals are both ruled by their passions¹⁷ and determined by their environments,¹⁸ Xunzi considers these ritual strictures to be an essential component of moral development, as they provide the practical training necessary to transcend these physical and environmental limitations:

Now it is the nature of man that when he is hungry, he will desire satisfaction, when he is cold he will desire warmth, and when he is weary he will desire rest. This is his emotional nature. And yet a man, although he is hungry, will not dare to be the first to eat in the presence of his elders, because he knows that he should yield to them, and although he is weary, he will not dare to demand rest because he knows he should relieve others of the burden of labour. For a son to yield to his father or a younger brother yield to his elder brother – acts such as these are all contrary to man's nature and run counter to his emotions. And yet they represent the way of filial piety and the proper forms enjoined by ritual principles. Hence, if men follow their emotional nature, there will be no courtesy or humility; courtesy and humility in fact run counter to man's emotional nature.¹⁹

Though his theory lacks the terminology of “performativity”, “canonical language” and “hegemonic discourse communities” that characterize the modern academic study of ritual (as outlined below), Xunzi's theories are remarkable for the degree to which they are echoed in modern scholarship²⁰ – an especially notable fact given that he was exploring *li* from an emic, participatory perspective.

¹⁷ “Man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied for him, he cannot but seek some means to satisfy them himself. If there are no limits and degrees to his seeking, then he will inevitably fall to wrangling with other men. From wrangling comes disorder and from disorder comes exhaustion. The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual principles in order to curb it, to train men's desires and to provide for their satisfaction.” *Xunzi* 19 (Watson (1967) 89).

¹⁸ “In the same way a man, no matter how fine his nature or how keen his mind, must seek a worthy teacher to study under and good companions to associate with.... Then, although he is not aware of it, he will day by day progress in the practice of benevolence and righteousness, for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to progress. But if a man associates with men who are not good, then he will hear only deceit and lies and will see only conduct that is marked by wantonness, evil, and greed. Then, although he is not aware of it, he himself will soon be in danger of severe punishment, for the environment he is subject to will cause him to be in danger. An old text says, ‘If you do not know a man, look at his friends; if you do not know a ruler, look at his attendants.’ Environment is the important thing! Environment is the important thing!” *Xunzi* 23 (Watson (1967) 170-171).

¹⁹ *Xunzi* 23 (Watson (1967) 159-160).

²⁰ The above statement should not be read as an assertion that Xunzi denied the extrahuman dimension of Confucian ritualism, only that his views of its transformative capacity are commensurate with the perspectives of many Western scholars. Benjamin Schwartz provides the following summary of Xunzi's religious leanings: “We have already noted that the ‘objective’ order of society embodied in *li* and law is also on some level embedded in the order of Heaven and that in fashioning the human order the sages do not freely invent but actually make manifest a universal pattern somehow already rooted in the ultimate nature of things. Xunzi's sage most definitely does not, like Nietzsche's superman, freely ‘create values’” (316).

By the Neo-Confucian era, the centrality of ritual was downgraded (at least in theoretical texts) in favour of a syncretistic emphasis on metaphysical and cosmological speculation.²¹ This being said, these theoretical developments were not achieved at the expense of the practical Confucian focus on ritualism, as attested to by the ever-developing state cult of Confucius²² and the imperial promotion (and eventual standardization) of a (predominantly Confucian) ritual system throughout all strata of Chinese society.²³

These rituals were an essential element of Chinese society and its religious discourse, as they provided a humanistic (or “anthropocosmic”²⁴) body of techniques that were thought to

²¹ See John H. Berthrong, *Transformations of the Confucian Way*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 86-114, for an overview of this shift in emphasis. However, it should be noted that this change of focus did not result in the marginalization of ritual, a point that is persuasively argued in Kai-wing Chow’s “Ritual, Cosmology, and Ontology: Chang Tsai’s Moral Philosophy and Neo-Confucian Ethics” *Philosophy East and West*, 43: 2 (April 1993), 201-228, wherein the author suggests that Chang Tsai (Zhang Zai), a philosopher primarily known in the west for his metaphysical theories, could equally be characterized by his “strong emphasis on moral education through ritual practice” (202).

²² As described in John K. Shryock’s *The Origin and Development of the State Cult of Confucius*, (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966). For modern perspective that brings in some additional interpretive issues, see Thomas A. Wilson, “Ritualizing Confucius/Kongzi: The Family and State Cults of the Sage of Culture in Imperial China” in *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*, edited by Thomas A. Wilson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 43-94.

²³ This “ritual standardization hypothesis” is developed and cogently argued in Watson’s “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance”: “If anything is central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture, it is the standardization of ritual. To be Chinese is to understand, and accept the view, that there is a correct way to perform rites associated with the life-cycle, the most important being weddings and funerals. By following accepted ritual routines ordinary citizens participated in the process of cultural unification” (3). More pertinent to the Confucian tradition is Evelyn S. Rawski’s suggestion that “[i]n the eleventh and twelfth centuries a newly vigorous Confucian officialdom began to look closely at and to correct popular mores through reform of marriage and mourning customs. The impact of the Neo-Confucian concern with social transformation of commoners and not merely the ruling elite was heightened by the many fundamental changes occurring in Sung society. The development of printing, for example, enabled wide dissemination of books, and Confucians were quick to seize on this medium to spread their ideas: indeed, a central impulse promoting the advance of printing was the urge to standardize Confucian texts.” “A Historian’s Approach to Chinese Death Ritual” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, edited by James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 20-34, 30-31. One of the texts that achieved considerable influence through this newfound form of dissemination was Zhuxi’s *Family Rituals*, as discussed in Ebrey (1991) and Ebrey (1995).

Though some scholars have raised questions concerning the universal applicability of this hypothesis (as argued by Paul R. Katz (see ff. 27 on the following page)), it nevertheless serves as strong testament to the centrality (if not universality) of Confucian ritualism in the Chinese consciousness.

²⁴ Tu Weiming coins the evocative term “anthropocosmic” to describe the transcendental referent inherent in Confucian humanism, suggesting that “to Confucius, what had already been created, notably the “ritual and music” of the human community, was not merely of humans, [but] was also sanctioned and sponsored by the mandate of Heaven. ... This awareness, predicated on a deep-rooted faith in the continuation of human culture not only as an historical fact but also as the unfolding of a transcendent reality, enabled Confucius to cultivate a sense of mission” (2). This conception extends to Confucianism the same type of ontologically- and cosmologically-porous worldview (with respect to the human and extra-human realms) described at length in chapter two.

facilitate the achievement of social harmony on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels.²⁵ These related aims – namely, the orderly regulation of individual families and the proper governance of the state – were seen as a broad class of practical problems that centered on aligning human nature with an overarching standard of behavior (the oft-discussed *Dao* 道). Though different schools of thought debated the correct means of achieving this end,²⁶ ritual consistently stood out as an efficacious solution to the problem of ensuring social cohesion.

This being said, the idea of “ritual as corrective” was not restricted to the debates of intellectual elites, but was instead prevalent throughout Chinese culture.²⁷ One reason for this was the role of shame and status in traditional China, as these two factors defined a framework within which one’s social status was directly tied to one’s perceived successes or failures in the

²⁵ See, for example, D. W. Y. Kwok, “On the Rites and Rights of Being Human” in Confucianism and Human Rights, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 83-93; Randall Peerenboom, “Confucian Harmony and Freedom of Thought: Right to Think versus Right Thinking” in Confucianism and Human Rights, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 234-260. In both of these articles, the respective authors outline the historical role of rites in ensuring an orderly society, and then speculate upon the impact that this cultural inheritance will have on the human rights debate in China.

²⁶ In particular, the early philosophical schools (e.g., Daoism, Confucianism, Moism) did not dispute whether such standards existed (as this was a universally accepted dictum), but rather the locus from which they could most appropriately be derived. For example, a major point of disjunction between early Confucians and Daoists is that the former group argued that (Chinese) culture provided these standards, while the latter ascribed this authoritative role to the natural world. A. C. Graham’s landmark Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China provides an extensive exploration of this search for standards of behavior in the early history of Chinese philosophy. In particular, he argues that the philosophical program of early Chinese intellectuals “is a response to the breakdown of the moral and political order which had claimed the authority of Heaven; and the crucial question for all of them is not the Western philosopher’s ‘What is the truth?’ but ‘Where is the Way?’, the way to order the state and conduct personal life. From the viewpoint of the rulers who listen at least to the more practical of them, they are men with new answers to the problem of how to run a state in these changing time; and this problem is indeed central to all of them, whether they have practical answers (the Legalists), or ponder the moral basis of social order and its relation to the ruling power of Heaven (Confucians, Mohists), or as defenders of private life think the proper business of the state is to leave everyone alone (Chuang-tzu)” (3).

²⁷ Whether or not these rituals were effectively standardized by the later Imperial period (as argued by James Watson), it is an uncontested fact that such practices were ubiquitous throughout all strata of Chinese society during various historical periods. As a characteristic example of these assumptions in practice, we can turn to Paul R. Katz’s article “Orthopraxy and Heteropraxy Beyond the State,” which problematizes Watson’s notion of an elite-mandated process of ritual standardization in the late imperial period, but never once questions the centrality of ritual systems themselves. *Modern China* 33:1 (2007), 72-90. The ubiquity of ritual, as described in chapter one and the present chapter, is thought by many Western scholars to be related (in part) to collectivistic orientation of Chinese society. Given the manner in which social realities are generated and reified by rituals (as discussed below), it follows that societies with an increased emphasis on social cohesion, hierarchy and harmony will be more likely to contain well-established ritual systems. See Tambiah, 72-73; Liu (2003); Vliert, Shi, et al. (2004); Douglas (1982) for some theoretical perspectives on this issue.

fulfillment of social (read: ritual) obligations.²⁸ Within this framework, rituals provided a structured, efficacious means of demonstrating an understanding of one's roles and responsibilities,²⁹ regardless of whether one was a peasant farmer giving obeisance to a parent or an imperial bureaucrat respectfully critiquing the actions of the emperor. In this way, ritual was woven into the warp and woof of Chinese society, as its processes helped to define and reify an idealized, harmonious social order.

Intriguingly, the social prominence of ritual also provides eloquent testimony to the hypothesized rapprochement between the mortal and extrahuman realms in Chinese society (described at length in chapter two). Specifically, just as the fulfillment of ritualized responsibilities could be used to indicate comprehension of an individual's social role (with regards to others), so too could it demonstrate (or, perhaps more fittingly, "enact") the perceived interpenetration of the human world and the extrahuman realm of ghosts, gods, and ancestors. Indeed, participation in many of these rituals (which included practices as varied as ancestor veneration,³⁰ divinatory rituals,³¹ and sacrifices to wandering ghosts³²) was predicated upon the

²⁸ As described by Kwok, "an 'individual,' then, from birth heads into a network of clan and kin relations guided by the spirit of interpersonal and interhuman regard (*ren*). ... Although under such Confucian exhortations as 'cultivate the self' (*xiushen*) and 'restrain the self to restore the rites' (*keji fuli*), there is an awareness of the 'self'; this self-awareness is occasioned by the need to 'behave as a human being' (*zuoren*), which in turn means to fulfill the five Confucian cardinal relationships: parent and child, ruler and minister, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friend and friend. ... The only way to be a 'good person' (*haoren*) is within this network of behavioral rites" (85). Though this article examines the issue of rites from a predominantly Confucian perspective, it approaches them using the framework of "attenuated Confucianism" (namely, the well-documented assertion that certain core Confucian precepts were so common as to be considered universal values in Chinese society).

While this depiction of social roles and responsibilities is certainly appropriate in the Chinese context, Edmund Leach suggests that it is, in fact, central to all human relationships: "All person-to-person relationships entail reciprocity. Individual 'A', by virtue of his position in society, has rights and duties vis-à-vis individual 'B'. But individual 'B' in turn, by virtue of *his* position, has complimentary rights and duties vis-à-vis individual 'A'. The reciprocal/complimentary behaviours of the two individuals 'A' and 'B', in their interactions with one another, may be said to *symbolize* or *express* the relationship between them. ... As far as the actors themselves are concerned their mutual relationship *is* their mutually interactive behaviour" (150, emphasis original). Edmund Leach, Social Anthropology, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Throughout the remainder of the chapter from whence the previous quotation was drawn, Leach argues that one's status as a member of these dyadic relationships is largely determined by one's proper fulfilling of contextually-defined social responsibilities. In particular, Leach's perspective on reciprocity in social situations, when interpreted in light of Kwok's contention that ritual helps define the bounds of interactive behaviours, demonstrates one means through which ritualized action functions in human society. This possibility will be considered in more detail in the discussion of modern academic theories of ritual to follow.

²⁹ This communicative aspect of ritual is discussed extensively in Bell (73), drawing upon the theories of philosophers, linguists and anthropologists alike.

³⁰ The earliest origins of these beliefs are discussed in Paper, 47-50; Poo, 36, 67. Later understandings are explored in Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*, Ebrey (1995), and H. G. H. Nelson's "Ancestor Worship and Burial Practices," in

view that the extrahuman and human realms were conterminous and mutually interpenetrating. One of the most pertinent examples of this perceived synchrony can be seen in the ritual of “looking in,” which is detailed in Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*³³ and described at length in an article by Patricia Ebrey. In this rite, the celebrant (usually the eldest male of a household) would visit the ancestral tablets on a daily basis, bowing respectfully and informing them about the happenings in the household during the last twenty-four hours, thus reinforcing belief in the continued presence of the extrahuman ancestors in the social hierarchy of the family.³⁴ More

Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society, edited by Arthur Wolf, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 251-277.

³¹ See: Poo, 41-68. See also: Richard J. Smith, “Divination in Ch’ing Dynasty China,” in *Cosmology, Ontology, and Human Efficacy: Essays in Chinese Thought*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 141-178. “Virtually everyone in traditional China believed in divination. The problem was not whether to believe in it, but whom to believe. In the words of a popular proverb: ‘Do not say that King Wen’s hexagrams are ineffective [*buling*]; fear only that the fortune-teller’s reading is untrue [*buzhen*].’” (143).

³² These apotropaic rituals have been particularly common throughout Chinese history, with examples being found in Zhou dynasty literature (von Glahn, 31-33), popular ritual manuals from the Han Dynasty (Poo, 69-98), and later Buddhist practices (as described in Charles Orzech’s translation of “The Buddha’s Discourse on the Scripture of the Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 278-283).

³³ While Zhu Xi is, without a doubt, firmly entrenched in the Neo-Confucian tradition, it should be noted that this particular text (the *Family Rituals*) existed as a sort of fusion between classical Confucian ritual manuals, Neo-Confucian standards of scholarship, and conscious, syncretic adoption of popular practices (with the notable exception of any rites with an explicitly Buddhist provenance). This breadth of focus (with its emphasis on lived ritual practice) has guaranteed the continued applicability of the work, such that it has remained consistently in print since its composition in the twelfth century. In spite of its Neo-Confucian heritage, the text’s hermeneutic focus on reconceptualizing popular practice (albeit within a Confucian framework) makes it reasonable to use it in this general section on ritual in Chinese culture. Describing the text’s multivalent role, Ebrey suggests that Zhu Xi “tried to revive some practices described in the classics that seemed of particular moral significance, vehemently rejected customary practices of Buddhist origin, and was willing to accept customs he judged harmless as an expedient to encourage wider practice of Confucian rites” (Ebrey (1995), 128). Given the extent to which the *Family Rituals* became the definitive ritual manual for the centuries to follow, it can be seen to have exerted considerable influence on the practice of rituals in all strata of society (127-131).

³⁴ In particular, the *Family Rituals* stipulate the following requirements for the appropriate fulfillment of one’s filial responsibilities towards the ancestors: “early each morning [one must enter] the outer gate to look in,” “all comings and goings must be reported,” and “when an event occurs, [it is necessary to] make a report.” *Family Rituals* 11, 17. These reports would describe such life events as marriages, births, deaths, and cappings, as well as lesser occurrences (such as promotions and demotions, receipt of a title, or the awarding of a raise) (17-20). Commenting on the necessity of making reports, Ebrey (1991) notes that “making reports of these sorts in an offering hall does not seem to have been the common practice in Chu Hsi’s time. He is quoted as saying that most people made reports at the ancestor’s graves” (17 ff. 62). While this distinction was no doubt important for participants in these rituals, it is not relevant to the demonstration of the present point – namely the incorporation of extrahuman beings into the social framework of individuals and families.

This integration of ancestors into the social framework of a household (which is utterly compatible with the porous worldview described in chapter two) is also visible in the ritual prescriptions that were to be followed when departing on a voyage. For instance, “when the presiding man expected to be away ten days or longer, before departing he was to open the outer door of the shrine, bow twice, burn incense, report his plan, and bow twice again. When he was to be away a month or longer, he was to open the inner door, bow twice while still in the outer area, ascend the stair, burn incense, report his plan, bow twice, go down the stairs, face the shrine again, and bow twice more.” Ebrey (1995), 117.

broadly, a similar point is made in Jordan Paper's The Spirits are Drunk, which argues that the vast majority of Chinese rituals are predicated on sharing table fellowship with extrahuman beings.³⁵ While the majority of rituals were less intimate than the previous examples, their underlying worldviews were relatively consistent – namely that humans shared their physical space with extrahuman beings and that ritual practices were the most expeditious means of earning the approbation (or avoiding the consternation) of non-human forces.

In summation, Chinese culture (elite and popular, past and present) has consistently valorized ritual for its role in promoting social solidarity, encouraging group cohesion, providing performative experiences of proper social roles (with “social roles” interpreted broadly enough to include relationships between humans and extrahuman beings), and expressing ritually appropriate sentiments towards ghosts, gods and ancestors. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, this nuanced assessment of the functional utility of ritual in human society contains numerous resonances with the theoretical perspectives on ritual proposed by modern anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists. These resonances will be explored presently.

Theoretical Perspectives

As noted above, indigenous Chinese perspectives on the efficacy and utility of ritual share some marked similarities with modern scholarship on this topic. In the pages to follow, I will briefly outline the approaches of Catherine Bell, Roy Rappaport, Pascal Boyer, and E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, and, in so doing, explore the means through which their theories will help explicate the continued viability of ritual in modern China. In particular, these theorists will help delineate the relationship(s) between ritual and community, and the role of ritual in the generation of socio-religious goods (such as perceived efficacy, shared participation in religious systems, and acceptance of religiously mandated social roles).

³⁵ More specifically, Paper's central postulate is that the praxis-based elements of ritual meals far outweighed any mythological/“theological” underpinning, allowing these practices to remain relevant throughout Chinese history (in spite of various changes in elite and popular approaches to religion). As he suggests, “the early ruling clans traced their descent from mythic beings or deities, and their deceased clan chiefs became powerful spirits, but family sacrificial meals involved ancestors ranging from legendary figures to those of immediate memory, according to the family's status. Clearly the pattern of activity was essential and mythic origin inconsequential, or the ritual meal could not have become the basic religious pattern of all families, including those in areas into which Chinese culture had spread” (31).

The first argument for the social function of ritual in modern Chinese society can be seen in Adam Chau's Miraculous Response, which argues that these rituals betoken common participation in a network of religious economy shared by others in their communities. In particular, he argues that the number of individuals participating in rites dedicated to a given extrahuman agent, coupled with their level of dedication to these rites, provides a fairly robust heuristic assessment of a given cult's relevance within its socio-cultural milieu.³⁶ Moreover, Chau also notes that these ritually defined cults become the nexus of a system of discourse for all participants – a point that is in keeping with the discussion of belief found in chapter two:

Belief in deities is as much a personal psychological state as a public discourse. When the majority of a close-knit village community believe in the village deity, it is extremely difficult to publicly present dissenting views, much less knock down the deity's statue. Members of the community who believe in the deity thus form a discourse community as well, enforcing a more or less uniform view on the efficacy of the deity, even if allowing different individual experience with the deity. If a person states that he doesn't believe in the deity and something terrible happens to him or his family, believers will say that the person suffers because the deity is punishing him for his blasphemy and impropriety. Normally, very few people have the nerve or resolve to counter such a strong communal hegemonic force.³⁷

As can be seen, Chau's experience highlights the role of shared narratives and canonical cultural materials in the construction of a normative understanding of extrahuman efficacy.

This view, which suggests that ritual creates social affect by generating religious goods, is borne out in the theoretical treatises of Catherine Bell and Roy Rappaport. Pursuant to this general thesis, Bell argues that ritual generates and undergirds social realities through its ability to mediate between the mundane world and (postulated) super-mundane realities:

The degree to which activities are ritualized – for instance, how much communality, how much appeal to deities and other familiar rites, how much formality or attention to rules, and how much emphasis on performance or appeal to traditional precedents – is the degree to which the participants suggest that the authoritative values and forces shaping

³⁶ As per Chau: "On the other hand, *ling* inheres in concrete relationships, between the deity and an individual worshiper or between the deity and a community. It is meaningful to worshipers mostly in the second sense because *ling* in the abstract is only latent power, not manifest power, and the only meaningful way a deity manifests his or her power is through aiding a worshiper who is in trouble or who needs the blessing to weather life's many trials and tribulations. An allegedly powerful deity whom a person has nonetheless never consulted is without significance to this particular person" (65). A longer excerpt of this quotation was also utilized in chapter two's discussion of narratives of efficacy.

³⁷ Chau, 71. This particular observation, drawn from fieldwork in a Chinese village, confirms Pascal Boyer's general contention concerning the role of rituals in generating community solidarity (as discussed below).

the occasion lie beyond the immediate control or inventiveness of those involved. It may be assumed that these values and forces are lodged in divine beings, in historical models, or even in the natural superiority of some people over others. Fundamental to all the strategies of ritualization examined previously is the appeal to a more embracing authoritative order that lies beyond the immediate situation. *Ritualization is generally a way of engaging some wide consensus that those acting are doing so as a type of natural response to a world conceived and interpreted as affected by forces that transcend it – transcend it in time, influence, and meaning, if not in ontological status.* Ritualization tends to posit the existence of a type of authoritative reality that is seen to dictate to the immediate situation. In many sociological analyses, this is one of the most basic social acts in the construction of reality.³⁸

In this way, Bell notes that ritual functions in tandem with cultural canons, by suggesting that it provides a praxical means of aligning individual existences with authoritative realities.

Likewise, Rappaport makes a similar point concerning the nature of the relationship between ritual, posited extrahuman realities and social affect:

[T]he conception of the non-material as efficacious, i.e., as capable of causing effects, may contribute to [the transformation between concept and Being], for humans generally realize that effects are not directly caused by concepts alone (any more than, let us say, houses are built by plans alone). The efficacy of the non-material may imply the being of the non-material. The notion of the efficacy of divine beings, in turn, might well be founded upon the performativeness and meta-performativeness of language as expressed in ritual. The very invariance of ritual proposes, as Bloch has suggested, an agent to whom the efficacy of performativeness intrinsic to ritual's language can be attributed.³⁹

In his view, ritual generates these meanings by linking canonical accounts (e.g., texts and folk narratives) with indexical realities (the lived experience of ritual participants), thus experientially embodying cultural axioms that had previously existed solely as thoughts and memories. Once these axioms are thus reified, they acquire the potential to influence (and even direct) interpersonal interactions – a contention that is entirely compatible with Swidler's description of culture as a "toolbox" of beliefs and practices that can be marshaled in response to the challenges of everyday life.⁴⁰

³⁸ Bell, 169 (*emphasis added*).

³⁹ Rappaport, 398.

⁴⁰ Rappaport, 107-138. This perspective is echoed by Peter Stromberg, who suggests that religious rituals allow individuals to redefine themselves based on a group's canonical language, whereby "a previously referential term may come to have a special significance for the believer, probably manifesting itself on an inarticulate level as feeling. This profound feeling of significance is likely to strengthen the believer's commitment to the canonical language" (30). *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Likewise, this description of the reification of cultural constructs provides an

In a manner compatible with the theories explored above, Pascal Boyer extensively explores the role of ritual in creating social goods and providing plausible explanations for social realities in his book, Religion Explained. Therein, he suggests that rituals are useful in human societies for their ability to provide an experiential grounding for interpersonal realities (such as social roles and implicit ethical assumptions) whose origins/functions are not intuitively obvious:

[R]ituals are not necessary to social processes but they are certainly relevant to people's thoughts about these processes. That is, once you see your cultural elders associating a given set of prescribed actions with social effects that would otherwise appear magical, this association has some staying power because it is both easily acquired and constitutes a rich source of inferences. ... For instance, attending a wedding may well give you the intuition that your relations with the newlyweds will now be different and that this may be the case for other participants too; but having a ritual may give you a simple representation of why these changes are so clearly coordinated in all participants, since the event is itself a salient and mutually manifest reference point.⁴¹

The “inference systems” referred to above are the innate mental capacities that undergird everyday cognition (with some examples including our intuitive understandings of physics (which underlies the perception of physical causality), biology (which allows for the practical categorization of plants and animals based on meaningful similarities), and psychology (which helps explicate the actions and motives of sentient agents)).⁴² Boyer's argument, in brief, is that these inference systems, which are entirely adequate for describing the relationships and interactions between individuals, are somewhat lacking when it comes to explaining the actions of social groups. This issue can be demonstrated intuitively by noting the tendency of referring to such groups metonymically (“Canada's position on global warming,” “state interference,” “Exxon's environmental policy”), as if they were single, sentient agents rather than aggregates of individuals. According to Boyer (and a considerable body of psychological and sociological research), rituals fulfill a vital social function by providing a shared, implicitly agreed-upon means of short-circuiting these inference system, allowing the relationships between individuals and collectives to become more “understandable” (albeit in a performative, non-discursive manner).

insight into the formation of the “cultural toolbox” described by Ann Swidler (273-274), as it documents a plausible means by which social mores and cultural systems could be learned and internalized.

⁴¹ Boyer, 254-255.

⁴² These “inference systems” (and the mental modules that house them) are the subject of considerable research in modern cognitive science. For a good overview, see Pinker, 316-333; Boyer, 17-19, 99-118.

Given their central role in making social life more meaningful, Boyer also posits that rituals can serve to delineate communities, as decisions about whether or not to participate are often seen as definitive statements about group membership:

[The illusion of ritual efficacy] is strengthened by the fact that not performing a particular ceremony, when others do, very often amounts to defecting from social cooperation. For instance, once you attach a particular ritual (initiation) to full cooperation between men, or another one (wedding) to mate-choice, then not performing the ritual amounts to a refusal to enter into the same social arrangements as other people. ... So the illusion that the ritual is actually indispensable to its effects, although untrue if you consider human societies in general, becomes quite real for the people concerned, as their choice is between going through the actions prescribed – which seems to confirm that the rituals are a *sine qua non* – or defecting from cooperation with other members of the group, which is not really an option in most human groups.⁴³

In this way, in addition to providing socially meaningful insights into interpersonal roles and responsibilities, rituals also help define community boundaries by mandating standard behaviours (and responses) relevant to particular situations.

Finally, the discussion of Mao-related rituals that follows will utilize the typology of ritual proposed by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley in their fantastically dense and theoretically rigorous Rethinking Religion. Before exploring the typology itself, however, it is necessary to recapitulate certain central elements from their overall theory of ritual in order for the typology to be understood. The first (and most important) of these elements is the notion of religion ritual as a “symbolic cultural system” – a notion that they rather precisely define as follows:

Not only are symbolic-cultural systems responsible for organizing the behaviors of individuals and groups, but they are also socio-cultural systems (1) which involve symbolic phenomena; (2) which, unlike civil law, are usually not explicitly codified (and in those few cases when they are, they are usually not completely codified); (3) which are relatively restricted both in their use and in their transmission (hence, individual participants’ idiosyncrasies usually affect the fate of their forms hardly at all); (4) which, typically, are not explicitly taught; and (5) which, therefore, require that participants must have some form of *implicit* knowledge which their successful participation in these systems which their judgments about the well-formedness of real and possible symbolic behaviors within the systems reveals.⁴⁴

⁴³ Boyer, 255.

⁴⁴ Lawson and McCauley, 2-3.

Interpreting religious ritual as a symbolic cultural system allows the authors to approach the topic from a cognitivist perspective. In brief, this approach (borrowed from linguistics and other social sciences) involves the assumption that the relatively consistent forms (and functions) taken by ritual in human societies are predicated upon certain innate mental faculties,⁴⁵ which means that it is possible to analyze ritual from the standpoint of an idealized, hypothetical participant who is “fluent” in the system in question. A basic advantage of this type of approach is that it produces empirically testable hypotheses, which can then be validated by comparing them to the intuitions of actual members of the tradition(s) in question.⁴⁶

Developing from these foundations (and drawing upon neuroscientific research into the mental systems used to interpret action), Lawson and McCauley constructed an elaborate typology of religious ritual based on the following premises: 1) all actions require an actor (i.e., a being capable of agential action); 2) all actions can be represented as interactions between actors, actions, and objects; 3) religious rituals are actions; 4) religious rituals are differentiated from the broader category of human actions by the fact that superhuman beings (postulated in the religion’s conceptual schema) can serve as either actors or objects of action; 5) religious rituals, grounded as they are within these schemata, must always have objects (meaning that religious ritual actions will always be represented by transitive verbs); 6) rituals can be recursive, in that they may depend upon the prior performance of (real or hypothetical) rituals; 7) this process of recursion terminates with the action of a superhuman being, as within the conceptual schemata of religion it is meaningless to seek any prior causes (“beyond the gods, there is not only no need but no possibility for appeal”);⁴⁷ 8) these previous rituals can invest certain culturally-mandated, non-human objects (e.g., animals, plants, natural and constructed objects) with “agency,” despite the literally counter-intuitive nature of such an attribution.⁴⁸ Based upon these premises, they suggest that all religious rituals can be divided into four central categories: 1) rituals in which a

⁴⁵ As they suggest, innate human capacities determine “not cultural variance but cultural variability” (74). This being said, they acknowledge that ritual cognition is not as “nativistic” as linguistic cognition, suggesting that “in contrast to the development of linguistic competence, competence with a religious ritual system is clearly not a necessary condition for participation in culture. This too indicates that our genetic makeup probably has fewer and less direct connections with the system of knowledge underlying participants’ activities in religious ritual systems” (79-80).

⁴⁶ Lawson and McCauley, 3, 64-68.

⁴⁷ Lawson and McCauley, 95.

⁴⁸ Lawson and McCauley, 84-86, 87-89, 92-93, 94-95, 98-99, 108.

superhuman agent is the **actor** (“examples include rituals such as Jesus instituting the church or Medicine [a Zulu god] instituting the line of herbalists”); 2) rituals that *directly* implicate a superhuman agent in **any role other than actor** (“examples include the Catholic Eucharist [and] Zulu sacrifices to ancestors”); 3) rituals wherein the **actors** are indirectly connected (via a previous, more central ritual) to a superhuman agent (“examples include the ordination of priests [and] baptism”); 4) rituals wherein either **the objects or the actions** are indirectly connected (via a previous, more central ritual) to a superhuman agent (“examples include [a] parishioner’s blessing, sacrifices employing ritually established substitutes for the superhuman agents, forms of Christian communion not subscribing to transubstantiation”).⁴⁹ In their conclusion, Lawson and McCauley suggest that all of these types of rituals function to reorder (or otherwise modify) the place of objects and agents within the logic of the symbolic cultural system – a perspective that is entirely commensurate with the views elucidated by Bell, Rappaport and Boyer (as discussed above):

[R]itual is an important means for insuring semantic flexibility in religious models of the world. Symbolic actions like religious rituals establish new relationships between things within the world of symbols. ... In religious rituals participants rearrange the furniture in their religious world. For example, as the result of an initiation, the new members of the ingroup are now no longer members of the outgroup. They are now potential exemplars of the religious categories they instantiate. This changes many of their social positions and relations as well as their eligibility for many others. It gives them access to new places and new forms of behavior in addition to sometimes prohibiting access to old places and old forms of behavior.⁵⁰

As can be seen, Lawson and McCauley concur that religious rituals provide an experiential, performative means of interacting with the phenomenal world, while simultaneously shaping the individual’s understanding of themselves and their place within that world.

In summation, the theorists discussed above present a nuanced, multifaceted approach to ritual that proves invaluable for exploring the phenomenon within its Chinese context (in a culturally-sensitive manner). When combining their theories, two primary elements come to the fore: the relationship between ritual and community, and the role of ritual in the generation of socio-religious goods (such as perceived efficacy, shared participation in religious systems, and

⁴⁹ Lawson and McCauley, 128-129. It should be noted that their framework also allows for an additional form of ritual, but it was omitted due to its irrelevance to the present study.

⁵⁰ Lawson and McCauley, 161.

acceptance of religiously mandated social roles). More specifically, we see that rituals are efficacious techniques for transforming social relationships while simultaneously drawing upon and reifying popular theologies and cosmologies. In accomplishing their transformative work, these practices utilize revered texts, performative utterances, physiological techniques and appeals to canonical authorities, all of which tend to follow culturally constructed, seemingly immutable scripts. An interesting corollary of this understanding is that the literal existence of superhuman beings is of secondary importance, because the rituals themselves (and the worldviews that they engender) are seen to have the power to motivate individuals and transform social relationships.⁵¹ This perspective is entirely commensurate with the pragmatic approach to deities seen as characteristic of Chinese cultural psychology (as described in chapters two and three).

In the context postulated by this theory, the attribution of efficacy to a ritual system often depends upon the creation of a “hegemonic discourse” (to use a term from Chau),⁵² as its perceived power is largely determined by the development and transmission of shared narratives concerning its efficacy (and the efficacy of the (extra-human) beings that it references). When coupled with the role of ritual participation in determining community membership, this hegemonic discourse helps to construct a powerful communal consensus. This relationship is especially powerful when, as in Chau’s experience, the consensus opinion of believers is used to discredit or downplay the experience of non-believers (as will be seen in the discussion of Mao-era rituals below).

⁵¹ While this corollary is supported by the quotations from Bell and Rappaport above, Boyer also makes a similar point with the suggestion that “whether rituals are thought to have long-lasting social effects (changing people and their relations) or transient ones (curing the sick, guaranteeing good crops), in both cases the participation of supernatural agents adds relevant elements to the mental representation of the ceremonies, but it is not indispensable. Indeed, in many places the hidden ‘something’ that explains the ritual effect is ‘Society’ or ‘The Lineage’ or ‘The Community’” (261).

⁵² While the term “hegemony” is often used imprecisely, I think Chau’s usage is quite specific in that he is explicitly using the term to address the role of shared communal narratives in minimizing or marginalizing dissenting voices.

The multimodal relationship between ritual, religious goods, canonical language, hegemonic discourse, and community membership will be considered at length below, in the application of this theory in the modern Chinese context.⁵³

⁵³ As an extended aside, the mutually reinforcing, multi-disciplinary perspective on ritual detailed above is also supported by some conclusions from modern social science research, such as the theories concerning cognitive dissonance and the “focal point effect.”

The first of these theories, which was proposed by Leon Festinger in the late 1950s and given extensive validation through fifty years of subsequent experimentation, suggests that human beings, when confronted with situations that confound their expectations, will tend to unconsciously alter their circumstances in order to resolve the “cognitive dissonance” created by these discombobulating situations. In the case of ritual (especially religious ritual), cognitive dissonance research helps explain why rituals remain compelling even when they do not consistently produce the desired (or expected) results – namely, individuals will tend to marginalize those instances when the ritual proved ineffectual (in terms of their perceived cogency), while more forcefully attending to instances where the desired results were obtained, especially when they are emotionally or psychologically invested in the ritual system (a phenomenon sometimes described as a “confirmation bias”). See Carol Tavis and Eliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me), (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007) for a general, accessible overview of cognitive dissonance theory. For a particularly compelling account of the relationship between cognitive dissonance and ritual, we can also turn to Susan J. Palmer and Natalie Finn’s “Coping with Apocalypse in Canada: Experiences of Endtime in la Mission de l’Esprit Saint and the Institute of Applied Metaphysics,” in which the authors suggest that effective use of ritual is central to the ability of a millenarian group to survive the (potentially intense) cognitive dissonance that could arise when apocalyptic predictions become demonstrably false: “While some millenarians might strike a sceptical audience as ‘sitting ducks’ for cognitive dissonance, others might be more correctly perceived as actively seeking ‘noncognitive consonance.’ ... The process of rationalization-reinterpretation, however, must commence immediately within the first few moments following prophetic disconfirmation, as part of the ritual. The necessity for promptness is that reinterpretation must occur within the ritual process, that is, before sacred time fades into profane time” (411). *Sociological Analysis* 53: 4, The Unique and the Shared in Religion and Society, (Winter 1992), 397-415.

The second theory describes the manner in which individuals, when attempting to make socially meaningful decisions, will often attempt to coordinate their actions with their peers, even in the absence of any overt form of communication. The “focal point effect” emerges in these so-called “coordination games” (a term referring to any social situation wherein decisions have to be made without explicit consultation), with the “focal points” being culturally-conditioned beliefs and actions that individuals assume will be equally compelling for all members of their social/cultural group. Thomas Schelling, one of the pioneers in this field, describes the situation as follows: “the co-ordination game probably lies behind the stability of institutions and traditions and perhaps the phenomenon of leadership itself. Among the possible sets of rules that might govern a conflict, tradition points to the particular set that everyone can expect everyone else to be conscious of as a conspicuous candidate for adoption; it wins by default over those that cannot readily be identified by tacit consent. The force of many rules of etiquette and social restraint, including some (like the rule against ending a sentence with a preposition) that have been divested of their relevance or authority, seems to depend on their having become ‘solutions’ to a co-ordination game: everyone expects everyone to expect everyone to expect observance, so that non-observance carries the pain of conspicuousness” (209). Thomas C. Schelling, “The Strategy of Conflict Prospectus for a Reorientation of Game Theory,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2:3 (September 1958), 203-264. This focal point effect provides an additional justification for the understanding of ritual discussed above, as it helps explain the utility of ritual practices. Specifically, if ritual *does* provide a non-discursive means of inculcating and reifying cultural values (as discussed above), it then becomes one of the primary means through which these “focal points” are generated. In this way, cultural constructs can become part of a self-stroking cycle, as the more prevalent they become, the more likely they will serve as a focal point in future coordination games between members of the social group. See also: Tom Slee’s No One Makes You Shop at Wal-Mart, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006), for an application of Schelling’s theories to numerous group behaviours.

These two theories help explain the responses of Chau’s interviewees concerning the persuasive power of ritual. As quoted above, Chau notes that “[i]f a person states that he doesn’t believe in the deity and something terrible happens to him or his family, believers will say that the person suffers because the deity is punishing him for his

In some ways, these modern perspectives can be seen as extensions of Malinowski's then-controversial suggestion that magical reasoning, far from simply being "superstition" or "bad science," is a socially functional mode of discourse that can preserve social norms, mobilize manpower, and "performatively" indoctrinate the populace with proper emotions and attitudes.⁵⁴ Building upon this conception, the perspectives of Chau, Rappaport, Bell and others allow us to explore the means through which rituals provide phenomenological validity to the religious experiences of individuals, as they create a shared social context within which efficacy of extrahuman agents can be described, discussed, experienced and (resultantly) reified. Such perspectives are especially relevant to a discussion of Chinese religiosity, given the central role of perceived efficacy in their understanding of extrahuman agents.⁵⁵

Though the role of ritual in society and the means by which it operates remain somewhat contentious issues,⁵⁶ the perspectives detailed above provide a means of approaching the

blasphemy and impropriety. Normally, very few people have the nerve or resolve to counter such a strong communal hegemonic force" (71). With these two theories in hand, we note that this "hegemonic force" is a perfect example of Schelling's focal point effect, with the members of the community independently arriving at a coordinated explanation of events due to the intersection of their own beliefs with their beliefs about the beliefs of their fellow citizens – even in the absence of any overt discussion. Likewise, cognitive dissonance theory explains why the instances of a "non-cooperator" being punished seem more cogent to a believer than the (undoubtedly more numerous) instances wherein a believer's prayers and supplications were seemingly ignored.

In summation, both cognitive dissonance theory and the focal-point hypothesis provide additional credence to the theoretical perspectives outlined above, given that their insights into human nature (which were developed following years of experimentation) are commensurate with the theories of Chau, Bell, Boyer and Rappaport.

⁵⁴ As described in Tambiah, 72-73.

⁵⁵ See Chapter Two.

⁵⁶ In particular, scholars remain divided on the level of discursive meaning that it is appropriate to ascribe to ritual practice. On the "meaningless" end of the dichotomy, one finds perspectives such as the one elucidated by Frits Staal, who argues that rituals are entirely lacking in mythic/symbolic referents, and that they are instead constituted of a detailed system of syntactical rules, ordained by tradition and practiced without understanding. Moreover, he goes so far as to suggest that rituals are "perfect activities" entirely lacking in both meaning and utility: "To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value: but whatever value it has is intrinsic value" (9). Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26:Fasc. 1 (June 1979), 2-22. While this perspective is intriguing, it needlessly circumscribes the apparatuses of human cognition by assuming that they only operate in a rational, discursive context and that all other forms of activity are somehow "pre-linguistic" and, resultantly, pre-rational (20-21). This perspective allows him to conflate mantras with birdsongs, arguing that both lack any linguistic "meaning" or behavioral "utility" outside of the ritual context (279-294). Frits Staal, Rules Without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras, and the Human Sciences, (New York: Peter Lang, 1989). A cogent critique of this perspective can also be found in Lawson and McCauley's Rethinking Religion, where they argue that his view overstates the role of doctrine in religion and simultaneously denies the role of semantics in ritual – both of which are untenable positions (167-169). On the opposite end of the dichotomy, one finds scholars such as Robertson Smith, E. B. Tylor, James G. Frazer and others who argue for the utter commensurability of ritual and myth by suggesting that rituals simply represent the physical enacting of discursive mythological, theological and cosmological truths (as described in Bell, 3-16). As Bell notes, such an approach remains relatively common, especially in popular accounts of religion and mythology:

continued relevance and applicability of ritual in Chinese society. As will be seen below, these ritually-shaped modes of cognition and social behaviour are, in fact, one of the primary points of continuity between the imperial past and the (post-)communist present, for just as certain metaphorically-resonant images (such as the emperor and the deity) remain persuasive and meaningful in modern China, so too do the (often ritualistic) means by which such images are inculcated. One large exception, however, is that many of these practices have been “retrofitted” for use in less-than-traditional contexts – as will be seen in the context of Mao-related ritual.

Mao and Ritual

As discussed above, anthropologists, psychologists and social scientists have (in the last fifty years) begun to recognize the importance of ritual (and, more generally, of non-discursive modalities of knowing) in the formation of human societies and worldviews – a perspective that has been explicitly promoted in Chinese thought for over two thousand years. Given this perspective’s cultural currency within the Chinese context, it is not surprising that such modalities were utilized (both officially and spontaneously) in the state-sponsored apotheosization of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution. While it is outside the scope of this paper to explore the specifics of this period of turmoil in any great detail,⁵⁷ the (often ritually-mandated) process through which Mao was deified is entirely relevant, as I would argue that it laid the groundwork of emotions, images, and mental associations that made the Chairman’s transition into a posthumously efficacious being possible. As such, the following section will explore some rituals (both state-sponsored and spontaneous) that were utilized

“The views of the myth and ritual school, as well as their underlying model of primitive society, have remained popular long after the accumulation of a great deal of discrediting evidence. Herbert Weisinger has suggested that the school represented by Frazer has been so popular because it created one of the great ‘myths’ of the modern age! ... [T]he patterns that Darwin saw in nature, that Marx saw in history, and that Freud saw in the psychology of the individual are the same pattern of birth, struggle, defeat, and resurrection that Frazer projected as central to the religious lives of peoples everywhere since the beginning of time” (21). This organizing narrative is indeed central to virtually all perennialist approaches to myth and ritual.

Given the difficulties in adapting such theories to the Chinese context (not to mention the potent critiques composed by Lawson and McCauley, Laidlaw and others), I have decided instead to focus my attention upon the theorists introduced in the previous pages, as their own approaches (which cleave the Gordian knot of ritual and meaning by postulating a different type of ritualistic cognition) seem more compatible with the materials upon which the present study is based.

⁵⁷ For a some contrasting perspectives on the period, one can consult Chang and Halliday (2006); Lu (2004); Madsen (1984); Maurice Meisner, “The Cult of Mao Tse-tung” in *Maoism, Marxism and Utopianism*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 155-83, as well as the (still definitive) study of the psychology of the Cultural Revolution found in Robert J. Lifton’s *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*.

during the promotion of the Mao Cult during the Cultural Revolution, offering comments upon their social functions (following the theories outlined above), as well as their similarities to pre-existing traditional practices. In doing so, the typology proposed by Lawson and McCauley will prove invaluable, as it helps to demonstrate that, in this ritual context, Mao played the role that extrahuman beings typically serve in religious systems. It should be noted that the rituals outlined below should not be seen as an exhaustive list. Rather, they represent a spectrum of practices that are covered in considerable detail in the literature, which makes them suitable targets for the type of analysis employed below.

Mao Study Sessions and “Everyday Reading” (Tiantian Du 天天读)

One important ritual popularized during the Cultural Revolution was the institutionalized study of Mao’s teachings – a practice that was foisted upon rural Chinese by the armies of “sent-down youth” dispatched from the nation’s urban centers. These teaching sessions, which were often convened daily (or even multiple times daily), generally consisted of the singing of Mao-praising songs, the memorization/recitation of Mao’s writings (most typically from the Little Red Book and/or the Constantly Read Articles) and the homiletic application of these teachings to immediate issues facing individuals or communities.⁵⁸ While these rites were initially less-than-popular,⁵⁹ they eventually came to profoundly influence the moral and metaphorical discourse of the communities within which they were enacted.⁶⁰ However, this influence depended more upon Mao’s perceived (superhuman?) efficacy than on the particulars of his doctrines (a fact that will be considered in more detail below):

In the beginning of the Mao Study campaign the peasants ... saw only the halo of revolutionary accomplishment surrounding the person of Mao. Most of the peasants, however, were illiterate. They could not learn much more than a few slogans of Mao’s doctrines. When they participated in solemn rituals to study Mao’s teaching, they were really focusing their attention on the person of Mao himself and on a few of Mao’s more

⁵⁸ See Madsen, 131-141, 145-149. Lu also provides a broad description of this phenomenon: The ritual entitled “Sharing Experience in Applying Mao’s Teachings” “took the form of a small-group meeting, a seminar, or an assembly where one person or a group of people shared the ways in which they had applied Mao’s teachings to their lives. They described how they and society as a whole had benefited from the application of Mao’s teachings” (138).

⁵⁹ For instance, Madsen notes that the initial sessions in Chen village (the site of his in-depth diachronic analysis) were only attended by approximately one fifth of the population (133-134).

⁶⁰ As per Madsen, “One knew what it meant to be a good person by listening to the voice of approved political authority – authority canonized by the approval of Chairman Mao. The young people’s moral discourse thus centered around exegesis of official government moral imperatives and their application to the details of daily life” (112).

noble-minded ideas. As we shall see, this could and did lead to a heightened sense of unity and common purpose, at least for a time. And it promoted the loose integration between traditional moral discourse and the basic principles of Maoist teaching.⁶¹

In this way, Mao's thought came to be inculcated as a canon of belief (to use Delwin Brown's terminology),⁶² an open and polysemous collection of tenets, anecdotes and practices that could be drawn upon (with varying interpretations) in response to the challenges of daily life.⁶³ A side effect of the canonical status of Mao's writings, however, was the (implicit) promotion of the sent-down youth (as well as any peasants who could effectively utilize this discourse) as a form of "priestly class":

The Maoist paradigm for moral discourse can lead to coherent moral discussion only if all members of a group are intimately familiar with the details of the authoritative teaching [e.g., the intelligentsia, the youth and/or certain peasants who actively studied these teachings].... The way is then open for such people to claim that they form a moral aristocracy within communities of illiterates.... [Furthermore,] to lead to coherent moral discussion, the authoritative mode of moral discourse also requires that the voice of authority be clear. If the words of the teaching are not clear, an infallible authority is needed to evaluate canonical interpretations of the teachings. In the mid-1960s, the highest officials of the government were supposed to provide such authority. But when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, the moral authority of the central government was demolished, and it suddenly became possible for different groups to advance their own interpretation of Mao's writings, causing tremendous political and moral chaos.⁶⁴

As can be seen, these study rituals served many of the purposes traditionally ascribed to religious rituals (as described above): they postulated an authoritative reality (in the writings/personal charisma of Mao) and provided a means of aligning oneself with it, they redefined social roles and responsibilities, and they created "religious" goods (in this case, the social prestige accorded to those thought to possess a purer understanding of Mao's teachings, as well as an increased commitment to the supernatural efficacy of Mao). As Madsen notes,

⁶¹ Madsen, 131.

⁶² Conversely, it could also be seen as a Swidlerian "cultural toolbox."

⁶³ As Madsen notes, "When [the sent-down youths] returned to Chen village, they helped the work team organize a series of political rituals to begin the process of transforming peasant consciousness. These meetings, Mao Zedong Thought Training Sessions, had primarily a kerygmatic rather than a didactic purpose. Like religious revival meetings in the United States, they aimed not to teach a rationally coherent system of abstract doctrines but to proclaim a few fundamental ideas, to endow them with compelling moral and emotional power, and to call for personal and communal conversion to a life structured around them. These ideas were not the clearly defined concepts of the philosopher or scientist but the multivocal symbols of the prophet and the poet" (133).

⁶⁴ Madsen, 16.

[T]he training session rituals imbued the parables containing Mao's moral teachings with an aura of holy goodness and made Mao himself a symbol of salvation. Expressed in richly vague compact sayings, the Maoist teachings came to represent a wide range of profound human experiences for those hearing them: the peasants' memories of deliverance from fear and oppression and their hopes for making their ancestral home a prosperous and proud community, the dreams of the sent-down youth for revolutionary glory, the desires of the work team to accomplish a job well done. In the training session rituals, all of these memories, wishes, dreams, and hopes were fused into a common set of symbols – the vaguely presented teachings of Mao and the person of Mao. These symbols became the emblems of a single moral community uniting the peasants, the sent-down youth, and the work team. All of these different groups felt that they were part of a common holy enterprise, even though they might think about the meaning of that enterprise in somewhat different ways. Their differences remained, but because of this fundamental unity around Maoist symbols, their different streams of moral discourse flowed into, influenced, and adapted themselves to one another.⁶⁵

Within the framework defined by Lawson and McCauley, these practices would be characterized as *type three* rituals, given that these study sessions (which could be described as rites of passage into a Maoist community)⁶⁶ were predicated upon the instructors' "ordination" by Mao's edict (an embedded ritual).⁶⁷ The typology posits two general, corollary assumptions about this type of ritual, both of which are borne out in the context of the Mao-centered rituals described above: first, that the moral authority of the practices in question would be entirely derived from the embedded ritual;⁶⁸ and, second, that the ritual would be reversible.⁶⁹ In the first case, it has already been demonstrated that the moral authority granted to these youths (and, by association, to those peasants who most effectively utilized their Mao-inspired teachings) terminated with Mao (and his efficacious writings) – it was both meaningless and treasonous to seek justification for these practices beyond their (divinized) point of origin. Second, given that these rites provided a change of status within the community, Lawson and McCauley's research implies that a parallel ritual would likely exist to reverse these changes (and the status effects emanating from them). This is in fact the case, as will be discussed below in the section on (self-) criticism rituals.

⁶⁵ Madsen, 136.

⁶⁶ For a more dramatic instance of a Maoist rite of passage, see the discussion on Struggle Sessions below.

⁶⁷ Lawson and McCauley, 129.

⁶⁸ Lawson and McCauley, 95.

⁶⁹ Lawson and McCauley, 131-133.

One result of these sessions was to transform Mao's teachings into talismans – miraculous words that could be used to solve any problem,⁷⁰ cure any malady,⁷¹ and provide universal ethical guidance. While such “magical” applications were most often seen among the peasants,⁷² they can actually be traced back to official edicts, as when Lin Biao averred that the people should let “Mao Zedong's Thought control everything” and that Mao's directives “must be carried out whether one understands them or not.”⁷³ This perspective was potently demonstrated in the rhetoric adopted by the writers of Big Character Posters (large, inexpensively produced missives that were used by revolutionaries to express political/social points):

Nearly every wall poster used Mao's quotations, poems and new directives as justification for their accusations and action. . . . In all posters of the time Mao's words were worshiped as absolute truth and infallible guidance in every aspect of life.⁷⁴

In all of these contexts, Mao's words were accorded the status of talismans – sacred sources of efficacy whose (near) universal acceptance actually *did* grant them a measure of power over social relations.

This talismanic use of Mao's writings bears a strong resemblance to application of revered texts in traditional Chinese culture.⁷⁵ In particular, these teachings came to serve the

⁷⁰ Zuo, 102-104: “the fanatical attitude that the masses held toward Mao's “Little Red Book” resembled people's attitude towards animistic magic in the past. As people in traditional Chinese society believed in the power of magic, the masses in the Cultural Revolution believed that the “Little Red Book” would save them from all trouble” (104).

⁷¹ Urban (1971) contains numerous accounts, each drawn from Chinese print and broadcast media, of Mao's teachings aiding in the miraculous healing of afflicted individuals. See, for example, 1-9, 9-13, 21-23, 23-24, 45-46, 120-122, 144-150, for various descriptions of doctors (and non-medical personal) curing disease, restoring sight, and even bringing people back from the dead by applying the efficacious words of Mao to the problems at hand.

⁷² See, for example, Lu, 80-81. Liu Xiaoqing provides another revealing example: “If I ever had any problems I would search Chairman Mao's writings for an answer. When we lost one of our chicks I looked for help in his works. When, not long after, the chick reappeared, I knew it was due to the intercession of our Great, Wise, and Correct Chairman Mao” (*Shades of Mao*, 171).

However, it should be noted that such applications actually continued in the years after Mao's death. For instance, Hua Ming argues that “university students have found the answers to China's problems in the treasury of Mao Zedong Thought” (Hua Ming, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 150) and Jiang Shui and Tie Zhu suggest that Mao's thought can provide an efficacious foundation for a volume on successful business practices (*Shades of Mao*, 183-185).

⁷³ Lu, 66.

⁷⁴ Lu, 80-81.

⁷⁵ As Madsen notes, “In traditional Chinese pedagogy (a type of pedagogy that continues in the schools and colleges of contemporary China), a student is first expected to memorize an important text and only after that to begin the lengthy process of trying to understand it. Similarly, the first stage of the political pedagogy of the Social Education Movement was to burn a dramatic social ‘text’ into the memory of villagers and then slowly to help them understand it” (80).

same function that the Four Books and Five Classics did for the literati and imperial bureaucracy, becoming all-encompassing compendia of human knowledge that were capable of providing meaningful responses to whatever issues confronted their adherents. This parallel is explored in C. P. Fitzgerald's Mao Tsetung and China:

The thoughts of Mao Tsetung [Mao Zedong] have become to his own people in his own age what the Sayings of Confucius were to the Chinese people for the past two thousand years: the source of inspiration and guidance in matters social, political, and moral.⁷⁶

While some may argue that it is not relevant to compare the use of Mao-era texts to traditional scholarship (given the fact that the classical Confucian texts were not considered to be “scriptural” or divine), Tu Wei-ming suggests that the Confucian viewpoint characterized “the continuation of human culture not only as an historical fact but also as the unfolding of a transcendent reality.”⁷⁷ In this way, the universalistic use of canonical texts by Confucians can also be seen as a *type three* ritual! In a more unambiguously religious context, similarities can also be seen between the talismanic use of Mao's writings and the use of written texts in liturgical Daoism. Isabelle Robinet provides an excellent overview of this tradition's use of textual talismans:

The holy texts themselves act as talismans; ... Revealed by gods who retained half the talismans and the original forms of the texts, they are the guarantee of the divine compact with human beings, who receive them from their masters in the course of a consecration rite accompanied by a sworn oath the gods are summoned to witness. The talismans and often the texts consist of incantatory sounds and pictures that must be written down and recited. They bring the adept the divine help he needs to carry out religious practices effectively.⁷⁸

In addition to the structural and metaphorical similarities between Maoist and Daoist talismans evidenced by previous quotation, it also should be noted that textual talismans also played a

⁷⁶ Fitzgerald (1976), quoted in Lu, 106. This point, about the internalization (and subsequent performance) of texts, can also be persuasively made regarding the famous Three Character Classic (*san zi jing*), a Confucian document that served as the initial primer for hundreds of generations of Chinese students. James T. C. Liu, describing his own schooling, outlines this pedagogical process as follows: “In the 1920s, many children still studied under old-fashioned tutors, instead of going to modern schools. They learned to recite loudly the Three-character Classic by chanting. They did it so often at home and in the neighborhood that the womenfolk, though mostly illiterate, learned by ear a kind of second-hand audio-literacy and even to quote in their conversation the values in the primer; much the same as the Lord's Prayer was repeated in medieval times by illiterate Europeans” (193). James T. C. Liu, “The Classical Chinese Primer: Its Three-Character Style and Authorship,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105:2 (April-June 1985), 191-196.

⁷⁷ Tu, 2. In this way, the idea of “this culture” (斯文) is “laden with cosmological significance” (*ibid.*).

⁷⁸ Isabelle Robinet, Taoism: Growth of a Religion, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 99. These similarities obviously require further elaboration and analysis.

similar functional role in both traditions – namely, the identification of a certain subset of society as individuals with privileged access to an external, authoritative reality.

Asking Instructions in the Morning and Reporting in the Evening (Zao Qingshi 早請示 / Wan Huibao 晚彙報)

The second set of “Mao-centered rituals” to be considered is a constellation of Cultural Revolution-era practices centered around the incorporation of Mao into everyday life – namely the *zao qingshi* (“asking instructions in the morning”) and *wan huibao* (“reporting in the evening”). These rituals basically consisted of obeisances (including presenting oneself and/or one’s family to a portrait of Mao, performing Maoist songs and loyalty dances, and wishing good fortune upon him), and “incorporative” actions (such as asking for the Great Chairman’s council and confessing one’s failures to live up to his example).⁷⁹ As Lu notes,

After the wishes and singing in front of Mao’s portrait, a group leader would ask for guidance. This process was known as *zao qingshi* (asking instructions in the morning). At the end of the day people gathered again in front of Mao’s portrait to report what they had accomplished during the day and what problems they had solved through studying Mao’s pronouncements, confessing their selfish thoughts, and struggling to overcome them. This ritual was known as *wan huibao* (reporting in the evening).⁸⁰

Moreover, these rites were part of a large complex of daily Mao-veneration practices, many of which also incorporated the talismanic application of Mao’s teachings described above:

After arriving at work or school the day typically began with *san jing san zhu* (three respects and three wishes to Chairman Mao). Everyone lined up before the portrait of Mao Zedong and waved the Little Red Book, wishing Chairman Mao three times longevity and Lin Biao three times eternal health. The same ritual could also take place immediately after waking up, before the start of a meeting, and before every meal. It was then followed by singing, “The East is Red” and reciting Mao’s quotations.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Zuo, 101-102.

⁸⁰ Lu, 133. Similar practices are also described in Fox Butterfield’s *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea*, (Bantam Books: Toronto; New York, 1982): “‘During those days, Mao was really like a god in my mind,’ [Bing (one of the author’s sources)] went on. During the Cultural Revolution, there had been a ritual everyone had to follow. Every household had a white plaster bust of Mao, and each day all the family members had to bow before it twice. ‘The saying was, “In the morning ask for instructions; in the evening report back what you have done.”’ It was an imitation of an old imperial practice, Bing noted” (223).

⁸¹ Lu, 132-133.

In Lawson and McCauley's typology, these related rituals would be of the *second type*, as Mao obviously serves as a passive object of veneration, albeit being beseeched for instruction and approbation. Based upon this classification, their research suggests that these rituals would possess two additional characteristics: first, they would likely be of secondary importance within the religious framework under investigation (when compared to practices that feature an extrahuman force as an actor (either directly or indirectly));⁸² and, second, given the passive role of extrahuman beings in these rituals, they would likely require repetition to maintain their efficacy.⁸³ As it turns out, the *zao qingshi* / *wan huibao* rituals confirm both of these corollary assumptions. Speaking to the requirement of repetition, it should be noted that each of these daily rituals sees Mao in a predominantly inactive role (save perhaps through the efficacious power of his miraculous words), meaning that his perceived presence would have largely been generated (or reified) through repetition. Moreover, it could be argued that these rituals would have indeed been of secondary importance (within the symbolic cultural system in question) due to their relative small number of overt social functions (i.e., they did not explicitly change the status of any participants nor imbue them with any particular authority or sanction). This being said, these practices nonetheless exhibit many of the broad characteristics of religious ritual described above, including their aim of aligning participants with an authoritative reality, their prescriptive function in defining social roles/responsibilities, and their symbolic function as an overt, visible indication of one's acceptance of Mao (and his revolutionary ideology). This last aspect would have been particularly salient within the climate of suspicion and recrimination that characterized the Cultural Revolution (as distressingly demonstrated in the "struggle sessions" described below).

In addition to these functional characteristics, the rituals outlined above also bore considerable parallels with certain traditional practices, including those dedicated to ancestors

⁸² Lawson and McCauley, 125-127.

⁸³ Lawson and McCauley, 127, 133-134. They argue that these types of rituals require repetition because, unlike rituals that postulate direct divine actions, their results are less apparent: "Sacrifices, prime examples of Type 2 [rituals], are probably the most common irreversible ritual acts. ... Certain peculiar characteristics distinguish sacrifices from religious rituals of the odd-numbered types (institutions, initiations, investitures, baptisms, marriages, etc.). The effects of a sacrifice are temporally limited, whereas the effects of the religious rituals listed under the odd-numbered types are normally sufficient for a human lifetime at least and are often super-permanent. Consequently, these ritual acts typically do not need to be repeated. Sacrifices and offerings, on the other hand, must be repeatedly performed" (134).

and the Kitchen God. In particular, these rites are virtually identical to the rituals of “looking in” on the ancestors described above, wherein devoted family patriarchs would punctuate their days by regularly consulting (or simply paying their respects to) their departed antecedents. Even the social functions of this ritual (namely the reification of a social order which includes extrahuman ancestors as actors, and the performative expression of commitment to cultural values (such as filial piety)) are shared with its Mao-era counterpart – save the fact that the ancestor’s role is usurped by the Great Helmsman.⁸⁴ In a less direct manner, this “immediacized” Mao also comes to play the role of Stove God, observing the behaviour of the family from afar and adjudicating it based upon an externally established standard.⁸⁵ As such, these related rites not only bear functional similarities to many other religious rituals, but also contain echoes of traditional religious practices (a fact that would have certainly enhanced their cogency among participants). These parallels become all the more salient when considering the veneration directed at the deceased Mao (described at length in chapter three), as in that context the explicitly political import of these practices is drastically reduced, which, in turn, would have increased their symbolic and affective resonances with traditional worship practices.

Affective Performance: Maoist “Hymns” and Loyalty Dances

As a slight aside, it should be noted that both of the rituals detailed above made use of what could be described as “performative Cultural Revolutionary practices” – namely, Maoist hymns and loyalty dances.

⁸⁴ Xing Lu offers additional insight into Mao’s popular usurpation of the role of ancestor during the Cultural Revolution: “In addition traditional Chinese altars used for ancestor worship were converted into altars of loyalty to Mao. As observed by Hsia (1972), ‘Many Chinese villages have dedicated “rooms of loyalty” to Chairman Mao and many peasant households have their own “tablets of loyalty.” These are clearly derived from the ancestral temples and tablets of the old China; mornings and evening the villagers gather, either in their communal room or in front of their family tablets, to pay homage to Mao Tse-tung”’ (134).

⁸⁵ While the daily supplications to Mao certainly bear some similarities to the popular cult of the Stove God, certain salient differences should be noted: first, the Stove God was most often seen as a servant of the Jade Emperor, who was represented as the final arbiter of the family’s moral conduct. Mao, on the other hand, was himself seen as the *sine qua non* of revolutionary morality; second, the Mao-era rituals (at least as far as my research has indicated) lacked a single “day of judgment” to parallel the traditional descriptions of the Stove God’s annual ascent to the Jade Emperor’s court (prior to New Year’s Day), where he reported upon the family’s conduct. This being said, the god’s role as moral arbiter and the daily veneration directed to him certainly bear some features in common with the Mao-era rites described above. See Robert L. Chard, “Ritual and Scriptures of the Stove Cult,” in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies*, edited by David Johnson, (Berkeley, CA: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 3-55, 13-21; Anne Goodrich, *Peking Paper Gods: A Look at Home Worship*, (Nettal: Steyler Verlag, 1991), 31-42.

The first of these devotional observances consisted of a corpus of lofty paeans that often described the Chairman in superhuman terms. Some examples can be seen in the ubiquitous *The East is Red*, (“The East is red // the sun rises // China has produced a Mao Tse-tung // He seeks happiness for the people // He is the people’s great savior”),⁸⁶ as well as in similarly propagandist compositions:

Heaven and earth are great, but greater still is the kindness of the Party.
Father and mother are dear, but dearer still is Chairman Mao.
Nothing is as good as socialism.
Rivers and oceans are deep, but still deeper is the comradeship of the
Proletarian class.
Mao Zedong’s Thoughts are the revolutionary treasure;
Whoever is against those is our enemy.⁸⁷

The success of these “hymns” in indoctrinating the populace with a superhuman image of their leader should not only be credited to their extensive use in popular ritual and public gatherings, but also to their compatibility with certain preexisting cultural tropes (a statement that is in keeping with the contentions of chapters two and three). Lu expands upon this suggestion:

A central element of Chinese mythology is the notion that emperors are mandated by heaven; thus, they are the ‘Sons of Heaven.’ Songs such as ‘The East is Red’ reinforced the myth that Mao was just such a deity sent by heaven to help the Chinese people lead better lives. In this way Mao was established as the legitimate leader of China, a living god who would surely bring happiness to people.⁸⁸

Though some individuals would have rejected such characterizations of Mao (at least privately),⁸⁹ these hymns were nonetheless instrumental in indoctrinating a large subset of the population with an apotheosized image of Mao (providing an experiential groundwork for the types of images covered in chapter three). One of Xing Lu’s interviewees described his own experiences with these hymns as follows: “after repeated exposure to the same slogans and images, I began to be convinced that Mao was the greatest and would live forever. I considered myself very lucky to be alive at this time in history.”⁹⁰ In a similar manner, Liu Xiaoqing, a Sichuanese film star, describes the enduring power of these hymns in her 1992 memoir:

⁸⁶ Quoted in Chang and Halliday, 475.

⁸⁷ Lu, 106. See also: Zuo, 106.

⁸⁸ Lu, 101-102.

⁸⁹ For instance, one of the Chinese peasant interviewed by Xing Lu expressed his (private) incredulity at these public assessments of Mao thusly: “I never believed that Mao would live ten thousand years and I don’t think people around me believed it either. But we followed others and shouted the slogan anyway” (65).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The first song I learned to sing was ‘The East is Red.’ ... Even now the songs I most often sing, the songs I am most familiar with, that I can sing from beginning to end, are ones written in praise of Chairman Mao. The words I can still recite by heart are Chairman Mao’s poems. And I still quote Chairman Mao at the drop of a hat. I know and hold it to be true that Mao Zedong will live on in my heart forever.⁹¹

Intriguingly, the persistent ability of these songs to indoctrinate the populace was not only presaged by Mao himself,⁹² but was also utterly compatible with the traditional Chinese understanding of music’s efficacy in the development of moral individuals and orderly societies.⁹³

Another type of performative adulation directed at Mao was the oft-discussed loyalty dance (忠字舞), which consisted of a rhythmic series of bodily postures symbolizing one’s wholehearted devotion to the Great Helmsman. Xing Lu describes this practice as follows:

The ritual worshiping of Mao was often accompanied by *zhong zi wu* 忠字舞 (the loyalty dance), which involved the simple movement of stretching one’s arms from one’s heart to Mao’s portrait, symbolizing again absolute loyalty and boundless love for Mao. ... The loyalty dance was performed in classrooms, in workplaces, and on the streets throughout the country. At times passion for the loyalty dance rose to absurd levels. For example, Xiao Di (1993) recorded that a local official sang revolutionary songs and danced the loyalty dance, in utter devotion to Mao, all the way from the airport to his office after returning from a conference in Beijing (165). An interviewee recalled how a shop assistant had gathered all the customers together to do a loyalty dance at the start of the

⁹¹ Liu Xiaoqing, quoted in *Shades of Mao*, 171, 176.

⁹² In particular, Mao argued for the importance of reforming art in the image of the idealized socialist state in his *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature*: “In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. **There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.** Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine. Therefore, Party work in literature and art occupies a definite and assigned position in Party revolutionary work as a whole and is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period” (86, emphasis added). *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Vol. III) (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 69-98. Accessed online at: <http://www.marx2mao.com/Mao/YFLA42.html>. The role of music in enforcing ideological conformity under Mao is also discussed at length in Arnold Perris’s “Music as Propaganda: Art at the Command of Doctrine in the People’s Republic of China,” *Ethnomusicology* 27:1 (January 1983), 1-28.

⁹³ For instance, *The Analects* suggest that personal cultivation requires refinement “through observing ritual propriety (*li*) and playing music (*yue*)” (14.12), and that *improper* playing of music will damage communities, as “when the observance of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark” (13.3). A similar point is made in the *Li Ji*, which argues that “when the early rulers formed the *li* [rituals] and *yue* [music] their purpose was not to satisfy the mouth, stomach, ear and eye, but rather to teach the people to moderate their likes and hates, and bring them back to the correct direction in life” (quoted in Perris, 12).

business day. Huang (1996) witnessed a grand performance of the loyalty dance by thousands of workers in the city of Xian.⁹⁴

Once again, this practice can also be seen to parallel the traditional Chinese perspective on the embodied, procedural character of human nature, under which it was assumed that sequences of bodily postures and physical exercises could beneficially modify one's character.⁹⁵ As such, it seems that (once again) Mao-era ritual drew upon pre-existing cultural patterns in creating a system of practices that were both internally consistent and personally meaningful for participants. Moreover, this cogency would not have simply been based upon historical and personal analogues, but would have also derived considerable cultural currency from the fact that they also served as public (socially functional) testaments of one's devotion to the Chairman and his revolutionary programme.

“Recalling Past Suffering and Thinking of Present Happiness” (忆苦思甜) and Struggle Sessions (批斗)

The final Mao-related practices to be discussed, the ritual of “Recalling Past Suffering and Thinking of Present Happiness”⁹⁶ and denunciation/struggle sessions, are also the most dramatic, both in terms of their emotional impact and their transformative effects upon Chinese communities. Often held in conjunction with Mao study sessions, the first of these rites consisted of the analysis of current social realities in light of Maoist ideals and was often book-ended by performance of Maoist hymns and recitations. Madsen proffers the following description of a Recalling Past Suffering ritual:

In the small discussion groups, people poured over the bitterness of the past and expressed their deep-felt sorrow for their ingratitude to Chairman Mao. The group leaders helped the discussants catalogue all of the little ways in which they shirked their responsibility to the collective and failed to advance along the glorious road to socialism. At the end of the training sessions, a special meal to remember the bitterness of the past was presented: the bitter wild herbs that poor peasants often ate in the old days when they

⁹⁴ Lu, 133.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Schipper's (1993) discussion of *Taiji quan* [*t'ai chi chüan*] as a “set of preparatory exercises [that] already constitute an entrance into the cosmic rhythm, a way of participating in the evolution of nature” (138-140).

⁹⁶ This rite is called “Speak Bitterness” in many sources, likely because a literal translation is much more cumbersome.

could not afford better food. Some of the old people actually wept as they ate the bitter food.⁹⁷

Broadly speaking, both types of rituals were unified by their use of “holy” texts and canonical discourse, by their stress on evaluating one’s adherence to Maoist principles, and by their functions in demonstrating one’s membership in the newly realized socialist utopia. They did, however, feature a single dramatic difference: namely, Recalling Past Suffering rituals involved the personal acknowledgement of one’s failures to properly embody Maoist principles while denunciation/struggle sessions involved being publicly accused of a failure to enact your social duties. As can be imagined, this single variation led to profoundly different consequences.

As suggested above, denunciation/struggle sessions consisted of a public accusation of one’s failures to correctly manifest proper socialist values, though it could also be motivated by one’s (hereditary) membership in a “revisionist” social class. The denunciation ritual, which was the less severe of these practices, involved a public confession of wrongdoing (based upon the presumed universal acceptance and knowledge of Maoist theory), verbal critiques offered by one’s fellows, and public acceptance of these critiques and acknowledgement by the accused that they will be more forthright in their future praxical applications of Mao’s thought.⁹⁸ While such critiques were undoubtedly unpleasant, they did not ultimately deny the personhood or moral potentiality of the individual in question – a point that is thrown into sharp relief when compared to the public demonization that occurred during a struggle session. The truly distressing nature of this harsher category of rites is eloquently captured by Richard Madsen:

In a struggle session, the guilty person is defined as an enemy of the people. His wrongdoing is so evil that he must be totally vilified, his reputation utterly destroyed. To open the session, the “master of ceremonies” whips the crowd into an emotional frenzy by portraying the person’s crimes in as lurid a light as possible. From the crowd, carefully prepared activists scream out cursing cries of rage. Others get caught up in the enthusiasm and start yelling out as well. Then the accused is led out by the local armed militia; he does not come out under his own volition but is *brought* before the enraged people by representatives of the public order. He is often made to wear a heavy placard,

⁹⁷ Madsen, 136. See also Lu, 139-140, for another description of the “Eating Bitterness” ritual. It should be noted that these rituals existed alongside a general focus upon the necessity of constantly critiquing oneself and one’s actions (Lu, 127-132), which was also an implicit focus of the *Zao Qingshi* (早 請示) / *Wan Huibao* (晚 彙報) rituals described above.

⁹⁸ Madsen, 80-81. Lifton, 50-51.

branding him a traitor, class enemy and so on. He cannot look at the people but must bow his head in abject shame. (If he does not bow deeply enough, his militia guardians will push his head lower.) He makes a self-confession. ... People from the crowd “spontaneously” bring forth evidence that amplifies his misdeeds and shows that these are part of a whole despicable pattern of wrongdoing. Shouted curses fill the air. Sometimes strong young militiamen rise from their seats and beat the enemy of the people. This is not officially permitted, but depending on the purposes of the session it is sometimes informally encouraged and tacitly condoned. The guilty person stands facing the people during this whole ordeal (which can last several hours); he is an object of struggle by the people, not one of the people. When the session is over, he is dragged away in total disgrace. He has been symbolically destroyed.⁹⁹

As can be seen, struggle sessions actively involved denying the personhood of those accused, based upon their alleged failure to embody the principles set forth in Mao Zedong’s speeches and writings. This forceful separation from the community was established both metaphorically (by describing accused individuals as “ghosts,” “monsters,” or “demons”)¹⁰⁰ and physically (by forcibly separating the accused from the community, painting their faces black and cutting their hair to make them resemble iconographic images of ghosts, placing “dunce caps” on their heads and placards describing their sins around their necks, and forcing them to adopt painful bodily postures).¹⁰¹ As can be imagined, these rituals – which radically redefined the bounds of communities and reversed traditional understandings of social responsibilities – had a dramatic effect upon the Chinese populace, especially given the prevalence of concern for “face” and reputation, with many of the accused committing suicide instead of facing the public disapprobation of their peers.¹⁰² The most dramatic evidence of the utter depersonalization of the accused in these rites can be seen in the occurrence of ritualized cannibalism in southern China¹⁰³ during the height of the Cultural Revolution – a horrifying reality that often occurred immediately following the denunciation of individuals at a struggle session! Donald Sutton, in

⁹⁹ Madsen, 81-82. See also: Butterfield, 345-347; Lu, 140-142.

¹⁰⁰ Lu, 60. See also Sutton, who notes that the accused “may be allowed to go filthy, and symbolic use is made of ‘huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs’ (the victim languished in what is called the oxshed), of snakes because they appear to die but are reborn with a new skin (a standard term for those under attack is snake spirits). The costumes used are monstrous and exaggerated to abstract them into an object of reflection about the values of society (the dance caps may be as high as five or six feet and bear legends referring to the crimes of the victim)” (164).

¹⁰¹ Lu, 60, 141.

¹⁰² Zuo, 103; Butterfield, 347-349; Lu, 19-20, 60, *passim*.

¹⁰³ As Sutton notes, there is considerable evidence for cannibalism not only in Wuxuan but also in the Qinzhou region in general. In all, it is estimated that approximately seventy people were consumed by their friends and neighbors (138-140).

attempting to comprehend these atrocities, notes their congruence with the struggle sessions themselves (not to mention the ideological commitments that underscored them):

The Chinese taboos on cannibalism are equally implicit and powerful but, rather than depending on logical categories, are above all social, that is to say, moral. Since classical times humanity was seen to be separated from animals not at creation but by the successive acts of the sages in inventing the arts of constructing houses, cart and boats, making clothes and cooking, and in perfecting the arts of humane government. ... In the atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, a single set of political criteria was elevated above all others, polarizing good and bad under a special morality that could not be questioned and indeed had to be acted upon. The usual restraints on violence broke down, and the result in Wuxuan was the ritualized eating of men whose civilized humanity was denied, indeed negated in the act of eating.¹⁰⁴

Both the Recalling Past Suffering ritual and the denunciation/struggle sessions can be seen as *type three* rituals, given that they were predicated upon actors following Mao's fiat (the original promulgation of which would have constituted an embedded ritual).¹⁰⁵ As in the case of the Mao-study rituals, the moral/social sanction of those participating was also based entirely upon their connection to the unquestionable moral authority of Mao, and, in an additional point of congruence, the effects of these rituals in defining community membership (either introspectively or proscriptively) were also ritually reversible (except when the rituals themselves led to the demise of a participant). As in many of the cases above, these rites also served many of the social functions of ritual defined in the first half of this chapter: embodying key cultural axioms, defining the relationship of participants to each other and to a realm of authoritative reality, and generating religious goods (in this case, continued success (or even survival) within the community, which was predicated upon one's perceived acceptance of Maoist doctrine).

While these rituals are certainly emblematic of (and thankfully unique to) the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, even they have some antecedents within Chinese culture. First, popular Chinese religion (in the late Imperial context) also contained a means of publicly airing one's grievances with others for their failures to adhere to the moral standards of the community. These "public indictment rituals" consisted of addressing accusations to a tutelary or judicial

¹⁰⁴ Sutton, 153.

¹⁰⁵ Lawson and McCauley, 129.

deity in hopes of achieving restitution.¹⁰⁶ As one could imagine, the social results of such an accusation would have likely borne many similarities with the denunciation/struggle rituals described above. Further, historical evidence also describes an expiatory practice requiring penitent individuals to dress “as ‘criminals’ (*fanren* 犯人) and ‘sinners’ (*zuiren* 罪人) during the processions which accompanied many festivals”¹⁰⁷ – a practice that is comparable to the means utilized to publicly shame those accused during struggle sessions. In a broader context, Sutton offers the following cogent comparison between the Confucian notion of *li* and struggle sessions:

The rites of struggle did share many characteristic features of the *li* – of Chinese ritual in its classical, Confucian form. Like *li*, as the physical realization of ideological labels, these rituals were not purely oral and performative but served to link written knowledge and instruction from above with individual behavior, the former being intoned and actually prescribing the latter. Like the *li*, they have in principle an emotional basis. Like the *li*, the rites of struggle ... began with proper naming, names defining status in a sense at once moral and social. Like the *li*, they used bodily action to reinforce status hierarchy, in this case class status, and their performance contained implicitly its own justification, for it was conducted with a sense of unquestioned moral superiority. ... Most strangely of all, like the *li* these cruel and hideous rites, in the eyes of their organizers and participants, represented and produced order.¹⁰⁸

As can be seen, the various rituals of struggle, dehumanizing as they may be, share some common features with more coercive applications of ritual that existed in the Chinese cultural tradition, especially in their ability to redefine social roles and responsibilities.

Conclusions

As described in the theoretical materials that began this chapter, rituals allow for the generation of social truths, which in turn can invest venerated targets with tangible symbolic power (as discussed in Chau, Bell, Rappaport, and Lawson and McCauley). Those who act as conduits to this power gain genuine social benefits from it, as long as the efficacious source maintains its place in the hearts and minds of one’s fellow citizens. The utilization of such techniques in the promotion of a living political figure – even one as idealized (and idolized) as Mao – provides a fascinating insight into the Chinese perspective on politics, the extrahuman

¹⁰⁶ Paul R. Katz, “Divine Justice in Late Imperial China: A Preliminary Study of Indictment Rituals,” in *Religion and Chinese Society: Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China* (Vol. II), edited by John Lagerway, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), 869-901. According to Katz’s textual research, records of these practices have been found in gazetteers and newspapers from Zhejiang, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangxi and Taiwan (872-875).

¹⁰⁷ Katz (2004), 869.

¹⁰⁸ Sutton, 163.

world and the interpenetration of these two realms. Moreover, they provide meaningful clues into the means whereby Mao's personal charisma was channeled into popular practice, which then reinforced the narratives of his efficacy in a sort of charismatic feedback loop. When interpreted in this context, the rituals described above help explicate the compelling nature of the posthumous Mao cult, as virtually all Chinese people above a certain age (especially those living in rural areas) had direct, personal experiences of his ritually-inculcated power.

This being said, the findings discussed above, concerning the relationship between the apotheosis of Mao and the ritualized modes whereby his charisma was reified, are provisional for a number of significant reasons: first, the manifestations of the Mao phenomenon in modern China are both regionally-situated and idiosyncratically observed, and as such they would optimally be explored via a set of geographically-diverse, diachronic studies; second, the correlations between past and present practices discussed above (in chapters two and four) are suggestive, but (as is the case in all correlative studies) they would be strengthened by including additional materials; third, the theoretical approach to ritual outlined above, though built upon a foundation of established, well-respected scholarship, is unique to this project, meaning that its broader utility (as a general framework) is not yet proven. Regardless of these provisos, it is still the case that these conclusions offer a valuable (albeit provisional) insight into an underexplored topic in the academic exploration of modern Chinese culture. Some potential ramifications of this study will be surveyed in the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Concluding Reflections

Thus ends the present exploration into the popular veneration of the deceased Mao in modern China, meaning that, as in the conclusion of all things, it now remains to ask what has been accomplished and what impact these developments will have upon future endeavors. Given that these two matters are intimately related, they shall be discussed in parallel as they relate to (what I consider to be) the three major findings of the present research: 1) the role of cultural continuity in the religious reappropriation of Mao, 2) the (equally important) role of cultural creativity/adaptability evidenced by the same process, and, 3) the broader theoretical utility of a cognitivistic approach to culture and ritual in comparative religious studies. Before addressing each of these issues, however, it is first necessary to emphasize the temporally constrained (and thus provisional) nature of these conclusions. In particular and given that many of the phenomena detailed above¹ continue to be extant in modern China, the present study can be seen as something of an artifact, as it is intimately tied to the time of its composition – a time characterized by uncertainty concerning the ultimate form (if any) that the veneration of the deceased Mao will take. Some speculations upon these hypothetical future developments will be proffered below.

Cultural Continuity in Religious Interpretations of Mao

The first achievement of the present research was demonstrating the continued viability of certain classical patterns within the newly defined context of Maoist (and post-Maoist) China. In particular, I contended that religious interpretations of Chairman Mao were commensurate with traditional religious expression, especially when one takes into account the phenomenon of *ling* (spiritual potency) and its centrality in popular religion. Demonstrating the viability of this premise required an extensive exploration of the role of spiritual potency in popular Daoism, Buddhism and folk religion (drawing upon the works of Chau, Paper, Poo, Sangren and many others), which highlighted the pragmatic importance of perceived efficacy in determining the classification of (and level of veneration accorded to) extrahuman beings. This historical

¹ The obvious exception to this statement is in the case of the Cultural Revolution era rituals analyzed in chapter four.

overview also delved into the postulated isomorphism between *ling* and *de* (the personal charismatic power typically associated with political leaders), and noted the extent to which imperial ideology and popular mythology mandated a (semi-)divine understanding of political leaders. From a functional (and narratological) perspective, this metaphorical rapprochement is understandable, as, for an average pre-modern Chinese, imperial edicts (and their impact upon day-to-day life) would have likely seemed as inscrutable and capricious as the postulated actions of the ghosts and gods, as can be read into the popular idiom “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away” (天高 皇帝遠 *Tian gao, Huangdi yuan*).

Once this historical background was established, it was possible to explore these themes in various posthumous evaluations of the deceased Chairman, where they were indeed quite prevalent. Indeed, considerable evidence exists suggesting that the living Mao’s undeniable spiritual efficacy (*de*) – demonstrated by his successes in building a unified China (a traditional signifier of possession of the Mandate of Heaven) and reified through ritual means during the Cultural Revolution – has begun to be reinterpreted through the historically-mandated *ling* framework, whereby many individuals (from big city taxi drivers to rural peasants) have come to credit miraculous outcomes to his posthumous influence.² More broadly speaking, I argue that the prevalent use of spiritual and imperial terminology in descriptions of Mao is quite *a propos*, as such language helps to construct (and reiterate) meaningful parallels between present social and political realities and the broader context of Chinese culture. Given the general resurgence (and reconstruction) of religious practice in China since Mao’s death,³ it should not be surprising that these images (and the worldview(s) that they imply) remain salient.

A final set of parallels was drawn between various Cultural Revolution-era rituals (such as Chairman Mao study sessions, denunciation rallies and the Zao Qingshi/Wan Huibao) and their traditional antecedents (which included ancestor veneration rites, practices from popular

² This being said, it should be noted that such representations are not universally accepted, with some peasants (Chao (1999)) and many intellectuals (Barmé (1995); Barmé (1999)) critiquing their fellow citizens for their credulity.

³ Specific examples of religious resurgence were seen in Chao (1999), Chau (2006), Dorfman (2003), Oxfeld (2004), Watson (1989), *et al.* A good overview of this revival can be found in Luo Zhufeng (ed.), Religion under Socialism in China, translated by Donald E. MacInnis and Zheng Xi’an, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), though it should be noted that it is written by a mainland Chinese scholar and thus has something of a pro-administration (and resultantly anti-religious) slant.

Daoism, and pre-modern indictment rituals). These parallels help explain why the Mao-era practices were seen as valid expressions of devotion to their leader, while simultaneously reifying the supernatural efficacy that was even then credited to him. Further, in the years after his death, Mao's person and the aura of sanctity that surrounded him (which was at least partially generated through ritual means) became decoupled from historical realities: a process that, I would argue, allowed him to become an "empty signifier" – a semi-depersonalized source of spiritual efficacy in the traditional mold of Mazu, Guan Gong, Zhongli Quan and even (to a lesser extent) Confucius.⁴

One of the reasons that the existence of these parallels is significant is that they have been relatively underrepresented in current academic literature. This is not to say that Chinese cultural continuity has not been discussed: as noted in the introduction to this study, such an acknowledgement is a relatively well-established position. This being said, when the majority of scholars make the case for continuity, they typically approach the issue from an elite perspective, considering parallels between erstwhile authorities (emperors, the imperial bureaucracy and Confucian literati) and modern ones (such as the CCP and Mao himself).⁵ In contrast to this, the present research is predominantly situated in the popular tradition, allowing it to help address this lacuna by focusing attention on a manifestation of cultural continuity whose significance and ultimate form have yet to be determined.

This being said, while the continuities noted above are suggestive, they do merit additional (avenues of) research. First and foremost, future investigations would benefit from additional field research – especially in those locales where the lionization of Mao is the most prominent (such as the Chairman Mao mausoleum, and the shrines in Shaoshan and Gushuicun). Detailed explorations these pilgrimage sites, which included participant interviews and observational records of the actions of visitors, would be invaluable for charting the growth and evolution of these devotional practices, as well as providing more grist for the historical-

⁴ For an excellent account of the creation of a spiritually-potent, "dehistoricized" Confucius, see Jensen (2002), which describes the creation of the popular understanding of Confucius through the implementation of various popular tropes. This account bears some striking similarities to the reinterpretation of Mao detailed above.

⁵ For instance, Thomas Metzger (1977) argues for the continuing influence of Confucian discourse and mindsets among modern Chinese intellectuals, and both James Hsiung (1970) and Stuart Schram (1987) approach the issue of cultural continuity in reference to Mao's doctrines and leadership style.

comparative mill. In addition, further research into the *ling* framework (especially concerning the relationship between *ling* and *de*) would be desirable, especially if it were to utilize ethnographic observation and/or source-language textual resources. Similarly, the role of Mao-era ritual in reinforcing these images and interpretations could be fleshed out using interviews and psychological studies, not to mention the fact that additional Mao-era rituals could be explored using the same framework outlined in chapter four. Finally, this research could be broadened to include the vast textual corpus of Mao-studies by exploring the role of classical imagery, tropes and styles of thought and governance in Mao's writings, speeches and actions, which would present an interesting comparison to the present study's focus upon his characterization within Chinese popular culture.

This inevitable (and obvious) divergence between the officially endorsed perspective of the Great Helmsman and its popular reinterpretation (as especially evidenced in the years after his death) provides an elegant segue into the next important topic covered by the present study – namely, the role of cultural creativity in the religious veneration of Mao.

Cultural Creativity/Adaptability in Religious Interpretations of Mao

As much as there are undeniable cultural precedents for the religious interpretations of Mao detailed above, it would be demeaning to the individuals under discussion to ignore the roles of pragmatism and cultural creativity in encouraging the development of these viewpoints. The first (and most obvious) of these culturally creative impulses can be seen in the fact that religious characterizations of Mao (especially those that arose in the years after his death) were profoundly *counter-cultural* – at least when the “culture” under consideration is the anti-historical, atheistic Marxism of the Party elite. By choosing to leverage traditional imagery, tropes and worldviews in understanding Mao, the individuals involved actively expanded the canonical resources usable for their own processes of worldmaking.⁶ Though such popular sensibilities were occasionally harnessed and exploited by those in power (as was the case in the Cultural Revolution), they by and large remained a means through which individuals could

⁶ This phrasing utilizes concepts defined by Ann Swidler, Delwin Brown and Nelson Goodman. It should be noted that this broadening of available cultural resources is one response to a totalistic culture, which often attempts to impose a restrictive, ideological interpretation of cultural and history. See Swidler (1986). See also: Jensen, (2007), 135-157.

meaningfully understand their newly defined political and social environments, allowing them to avoid becoming “passive cultural dopes” (to borrow a phrase from Ann Swidler). Indeed, as predicted by Bell, Boyer and others, these cultural materials (which included both beliefs and practices) were meaningful for those who utilized them due to their appreciable effects upon social relationships, wherein their perceived efficacy and practical effects reinforced each other in a self-stroking cycle.⁷ Finally, this cultural creativity is particularly evident in cases where the (posthumous) apotheosization of Mao allowed believers to laud their own identities (as members of “revolutionary classes”) while simultaneously critiquing the perceived (“immoral”) excesses of the current administration (as discussed in Dorfman (2003) and Barmé (1999)), as this process provided (and provides) them with a meaningful narrative context within which to exist.

The religious reappropriation of Mao, when interpreted as evidence of cultural creativity, would serve as an excellent starting point for numerous additional studies. First, an ethnographic exploration of the utility of these beliefs in the popular context (delving into their social functions, the narratives used to explain them, and the rituals that are used to reinforce them) would be tremendously instructive, providing similar insights into modern Chinese society akin to those demonstrated by Richard Madsen’s eloquent Morality and Power in a Chinese Village (which catalogued the peasant response to the Cultural Revolution). Moreover, if it is indeed correct to describe the Mao-centric socialization process of the Cultural Revolution as a type of “brainwashing”⁸ (or even as a type of religious conversion), some interesting results could no

⁷ In particular, see Madsen (1984) for a detailed exploration of the redefinition of social roles and mores (during the Cultural Revolution) based upon the ability of individuals to draw upon the canonical cultural vocabulary of Maoism. See also Sutton (1995) and Lu (2004). In a more general context, Feuchtwang (2000) notes that the return to religion in China can be seen as a type of reaction against the totalistic authority of the central government: “Religious resistance in these instance of temples, festivals and ancestral halls is more than a greater richness beyond the state’s interpretive communities. It is the assertion of a determination by local residents to make their own history, in their own interpretation of the stories and heroes who are their deities and whom they treat as present through their own spirit media. In so doing it creates spaces and occasions to voice discontent with acts of government. This is not simply resistance to the regime’s policy on religion and superstition. It is the establishment of a more general local authority, often capable of mounting local welfare projects and networks in their own defense and advancement” (174).

⁸ As suggested in Lifton (1969) and Lu (2004). Though “brainwashing” is the term used by both of the authors cited, it should be noted that this term is rather ill defined and potentially defamatory. On one hand, it characterizes all believers in new religious movements as victims (a stance that some would obviously refute). On the other, it draws an arbitrary line of demarcation between the indoctrination procedures of new religious movements and established ones. Indeed, some of the more vocal critics of organized religion describe *all* forms of religious education as a type of abusive thought control. See, for example, Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 349-387.

doubt be achieved by comparing the life-narratives of its “victims” to those created by cult-inductees and religious converts, as both would hypothetically evidence a similar tendency to define their lives in reference to these “canonical” experiences.⁹ Finally, it would be interesting investigate the extent to which various generations of Chinese citizens were “creative” in their reappropriation of Mao, as I would conjecture that this tendency would vary based on the personal salience of Mao as a signifier.

Concrete Application of Ritual Theory

Finally, this project also proposed a composite theory of ritual, drawing upon insights from experts in religious studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and linguistics. This theory characterized ritual as a multifarious mode of human behaviour, which non-discursively defines social relationships (as well as postulated relationships with extrahuman beings), embodies cultural axioms, demonstrates social responsibilities, proves community membership, and provides an efficacious means of generating and explaining social transformations (as in the case of marriage and other rites of passage). In demonstrating the validity of this characterization, I utilized the cognitivistic typology proposed by Lawson and McCauley to explore the structure and function of various Mao-centric rituals, and to compare them to various unambiguously religious rites. While the undisputed centrality of ritual in Chinese society made this approach a natural fit, I would argue that it could also be fruitfully applied in various contexts. Indeed, the study of religious ritual is perhaps ideally suited to cross-cultural analysis, as noted by Lawson and McCauley:

We examine religious ritual in particular because of all aspects of religious thought and activity it is the most constrained. Ritual is relatively easy to isolate as a theoretically manageable subsystem within the larger religious system. Its theoretical manageability arises from the fact that even as a surface phenomenon it is a highly rigid system of corporate action which changes far more slowly, most of the time, than other symbolic-cultural systems. When we observe a ritual we expect it to be largely the same as it was when it was performed the last time; novelty in ritual is mistrusted. ... Because of its relative stability, ritual can more easily be freeze-framed than other more volatile symbolic-cultural systems. ... The formality of ritual is not only an obvious fact making it susceptible to systematic analysis [however]; its formality has also made it a candidate

⁹ One excellent resource for such a comparison would be Peter Stromberg’s Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative (1993).

for cross-cultural analysis and comparison and the object of cross-cultural generalization.¹⁰

As with the use of any theory (especially in the humanities), my approach to ritual (in general) and my usage of Lawson and McCauley's typology (in particular) is best seen as a particular lens through which external phenomena gain a level of detail, definition and coherence that was previously lacking. This being said, the specificity of Lawson and McCauley's theory transforms it into a scientific approach (i.e., one that can be supported or falsified). While my successes with this method demonstrate its interpretive utility (and provide inductive justification for the viability of its premises), it would obviously derive additional salience from any additional study that demonstrated its predictive validity. Given the utility of this approach in my present research, I will certainly consider applying it in future projects.

Reflections and Speculations

Given that the religious interpretations of Mao described above are as of yet on-going, it is not possible to definitively conclude what the final shape of these beliefs and practices will be. That being said, if one takes the historical correspondences uncovered through the present analysis seriously, they suggest one possible branch along which these devotions may evolve over time. I will now briefly sketch in this hypothetical timeline.

In the years to come, it is quite possible that (like many other traditional religious beliefs) Mao veneration will gradually decline in the cities, a process that would likely be tied to the gradual passing of all individuals who actively experienced his *de* (i.e., the erstwhile Red Guards and their seniors). This is not to say that people would somehow forget about him (given that his picture will likely remain festooned throughout the country for the foreseeable future) but that his perceived power would wane. As such, he could eventually come to simply be seen as a "great man" (*wei da de ren* 偉大的人) among the giants of Chinese history (such as Confucius, Han Wudi and others). Indeed, as my interviews with Chinese students in 2005 demonstrated, it appears that this process is already underway.

¹⁰ Lawson and McCauley, 49-50.

Conversely, it is quite possible that, in the countryside, public perception would develop differently depending on whether (and to what extent) religious approaches to Mao were actively censored by the PRC government.¹¹ Given the extent to which theological, cosmological and shamanistic understandings of Mao have already been attested to in modern China (as demonstrated at length above), it would be reasonable to assume that such religious thinking would continue in the future, with various mythological, liturgical and ritualistic practices aiding in the transition from the living Mao's *de* to the dead Mao's *ling*. If this did continue, it is likely that Mao, like many before him (including Guan Gong and Zhongli Quan), would eventually earn a permanent position in the pantheon(s) of popular religion. This Mao – the benevolent celestial Helmsman of taxi amulet fame – could potentially become a substitute for the gods of prosperity and/or protection, based upon his association with the foundation of a new, prosperous China. More fancifully, I could even imagine a millenarian Maoist group, initiated after a theophanic appearance of the dead Chairman and modeled (perhaps unintentionally) on the Five Pecks of Rice movement. This group, mobilizing the disenfranchisement of rural peasants and allowing them a supernatural framework within which to define their own experience of the world, could even become a potentially destabilizing political force.

Conclusion

As in many Sinological topics, the present study has been consistently confronted with ambiguities and polyphonies. Just as the porous worldview of Chinese popular religion collapses the distinctions between ghost, god and ancestor, as well as the cosmological “distance” between the human and extrahuman realms, so too does the religious characterizations of Mao detailed above admit (and even require) multiple interpretations. Regardless of the form that public

¹¹ Interestingly, the government's perspective on this issue is less clear than one might expect. Just as Mao's successors were loathe to overtly critique him (given the extent to which their own power was contingent upon his “supernatural” charisma), so too has their response to these religious movements been less-than-entirely consistent. While the government has certainly been responsible for crackdowns on rural Mao worship (as noted in Cohen (1993), “Don't Kowtow to Mao” (2001), “China Rooting Out Mao Worship” (2001), etc.), they have also (implicitly) endorsed the religious sentiments that underlie them. Indeed, if one supposes that the government was entirely unsupportive of these practices, one is left with many unanswered questions: Why would the official gift shop in the Zhou Enlai museum carry traditional good luck charms bearing Mao's image? Why are they so supportive of the Mao cult in Shaoshan (and the pilgrimages that it requires) that they have financed the expansion of the highways leading into and out of the town (Li, 22-23)? Why do local cadres participate in Mao veneration rituals? Why does the Chairman Mao Mausoleum contain various religious/geomantic symbols (Wagner (1992); Cheater (1991); Wakeman (1989))? These issues, which are obviously tied to the ineradicable bond between Mao's charismatic legacy and the political legitimacy of the Party as a whole, are worthy of future investigation.

perception of Mao eventually takes, it remains the case that these phenomena provide intriguingly multivalent insights into the issues of cultural continuity and cultural creativity in the Chinese context. With this in mind, I will continue to observe these developments with interest, as I believe that they provide a microcosmic arena within which the issue of China's relationship with its own history and traditions will (continue to) play out.

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